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"Listen to me," he said, seizing her hands in a grasp that hurt her." (Page 184.)

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HIS LITTLE GIRL

HIS LITTLE GIRL

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BY

L. G. MOBERLY.

Author of "Fortune's Foundling," "Dan—and Another," "A Woman against the World," etc.

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God
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WITH BEST LOVE

TO

DEAR CARRIE,

THE MOST UNSELFISH SOUL

I EVER KNEW.

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HIS LITTLE GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

THE FINGER OF FATE.

THE white ribbon of road stretched across the landscape in a straight, undeviating line, showing no bend or turn—lost to view at last, not because it had altered its course, but merely because Giles Tredman's eyes could see no further than the point where the road and blue mountain spurs met and mingled in the far distance. On either side of the white ribbon of road, flat meadow land spread itself towards the lesser hills that crept down from the mountain spurs—hills that were covered with birch, and beech, and chestnut, and here and there an oak to remind the traveller of his English home. In the meadows tall poplars lifted their heads to the clear blue of the May sky; low bushes of hawthorn, like brides in their raiment of snowy blossoms, filled the

air with their fragrance; belated marsh marigolds gleamed golden amongst the sedges swept by the soft breeze; the sole remaining snow on the Mont Cenis group, shone dazzlingly in the sunshine that flooded mountains, vale and meadow land.

Glancing round him at the goodly landscape of Savoy, Giles Tredman smiled, and lifted his hat, with an instinctive feeling of thankfulness for the loveliness of the laughing land—of delight in the fresh green of spring, that seemed so especially green and fresh to the eyes of one newly come from the East. There were many things in his life to bring a smile to his lips, Giles reflected, as he sauntered along the white road that passes out from Aix les Bains, and leads you at last to Italy—many things for which to lift his hat in thankfulness. For, though he was a reserved man—and chary, very chary of expressing his deepest feelings—a strong poetical vein underlay the young soldier's practical exterior—and behind his bronzed face, and quiet grey eyes, was a soul brimming over with beautiful thoughts, and high ideals.

A keen officer, devoted to his profession, and to the native troops, who adored the tall young sahib, whose lightest word was their law, he was, nevertheless, looking forward eagerly to his long leave in England, and a brief sojourn in Italy on his way home,

had only whetted his appetite for his own land by the northern sea.

"Jolly sunny valley this," he mused, glancing up at the shining snow of Mont Cenis, and round him at the meadows with their snowy hawthorns, the hillsides whose trees showed every tint of soft spring green, "the sort of happy valley into which sorrow and worry have no right to come. And, by jove, I'll get Grace to come here for part of our honeymoon. She'll like the sunshine and the brightness, and the gaiety of this gay little place," and from general thoughts of the fair world about him, the young man's mind wandered to the more particular thoughts of the tall, blue-eyed girl, who to his poetic soul seemed the embodiment of all that was most beautiful, most perfect.

Left an orphan when scarcely more than a baby, with no relations but a gentle, chivalrous old uncle, who had been responsible for his training, Giles had grown up with almost knightly respect for womanhood, and with a simple faith in woman's innate goodness, which not even his years of Indian service had been able to shake.

Grace Cardew, his betrothed, was, in his eyes, the embodiment of all that a woman should be, and the silent meadows to left and right of him, rang with the echoes of his vigorous voice, as he sang,—

"The stars shall fall, and the angels be weeping,
Ere I cease to love her—my Queen, my Queen."

Along the white ribbon of road no living soul was in sight—he could sing his heart out to the May morning, and no one would hear or heed, and he strolled on, singing lustily, when, in the far distance from the mountain end of the valley a black speck became visible, its headlong speed bringing it rapidly into his line of vision, and showing it to be a powerful motor-car, containing only two men.

"What an ungodly pace that chap's driving!" Tredman muttered, moving from the high road to the grass bank beside it, to avoid the clouds of dust that trailed in the wake of the car; "not even a straight road like this justifies such a pace. My God! what was that?"

A terrific crash behind him was responsible for the exclamation—a crash, followed by a shriek of terror, and then no other sound but the ceaseless pant of the motor. Giles jerked himself round, sprang into the road, and peering through the white cloud of dust that still whirled about the highway, tried in vain to discover what had happened. For a few seconds nothing but dust was visible, and in those seconds the young soldier had raced at top speed back along the road, to the place whence had come that terrible crashing sound—that shriek of agonised

fear. And, as he ran, he tripped and nearly fell over something that lay in his path against the bank, something that lifted itself slowly with a little pitiful cry.

"Oh! come—please come!"

The dust was clearing away, and Giles, stooping down, saw a small white face looking up at him—the face of a little girl, who held out her hands, repeating her first appealing sentence—

"Oh! come—please come!"

"What is it? What has happened?" he answered, kneeling down beside her on the dusty highway, and drawing her shaking hands into his; "were you——"

"I—don't know," she panted out breathlessly, "the car—came—all in a minute—and—mother and I—mother and I—come and find mother—oh! come, please come!"

The small clinging hands drew him forward, and at the same moment a murmur of voices arose, and the dust cloud clearing wholly away, made him aware what a scene of havoc lay before him.

The great car, still snorting and panting like some beast of prey that has seized its victim and done its worst, stood in the middle of the road, and scattered on either side of the palpitating monster, lay the fragments of what had apparently once been a small pony carriage. Wheels, cushions, frame work, were

tossed together in inextricable confusion, and close to the bank a little chestnut pony lay gasping its life out, hurt to the death, and only able to turn pitiful questioning eyes upon the mysterious horror, which had brought such destruction.

The two occupants of the motor-car stood amidst the wreckage, and as Tredman and the child drew near, he heard one of the men say to the other, in French—

"Drive for your life to fetch a doctor. She is badly hurt." At that juncture the young Englishman realised that there was yet another actor in the strange little drama, in which he had so suddenly been called upon to take a part, and, with a sick throb of dismay, he saw lying amongst the fragments of the wrecked carriage, the form of an unconscious woman.

"Come to mother," cried the child whose hand still clung to his, "she has fallen on the hard road. It flung me on the bank, but—mother—mother—" and with a stifled sob that was far more heart-rending than an outburst of passionate grief, she flung herself down in the dust beside the inanimate woman.

"Is she—dead?" Giles whispered in French to the tall man, who stood looking silently down at the havoc his own car had made.

"Dead?—no," was the sharp answer in the same language; "my man understands these things; he

has felt her heart—he says she lives. He is going to fetch a doctor at once—at once," and so saying, he turned imperiously to his chauffeur, and speaking a few words, in a tongue which Giles knew to be Russian, waved the man towards the car. In another moment the huge machine was whirling along the road towards Aix, at a speed which made Giles pray that another disaster might not follow hard on the heels of the first, and he glanced at the tall stranger beside him, saying quickly—

"Your driver drives recklessly, monsieur."

"He is the best chauffeur in Europe," came the curt response, "and we have never had an accident before. But—" he paused, glancing from the Englishman's bronzed face, to the form of the woman and child upon the ground, "but—for some reason, why, I do not know, the car skidded as we were passing the pony carriage. We struck it full on the side—and—" he shrugged his shoulders significantly, "the result—you see."

"I see, indeed," Giles answered drily, his eyes deep with indignation, as they met the other's eyes—cold, blue and steely, "and is there nothing we can do for this poor lady until the doctor comes?"

"My man has given her brandy. He has loosened her clothing, and done all that is possible," was the response, in a voice which, despite its coldness,

struck upon Giles's ears with a peculiar fascination; "it will be well not to move her, until we know what her injuries are."

"Move her? No!" Giles exclaimed, "no one in his senses would wish to *move* her. We might be doing just the very worst thing in the world. But—my God—it seems so callous—so—brutal—to be standing here doing nothing, nothing, when—for all we know the poor soul may be dying."

"Callous? Brutal?" Again came that lift of the shoulders, and a faint smile flickered over the tall man's features—"It is sometimes less brutal to hold one's hand than to use it, less callous to wait than to act precipitately." Again Giles was struck by the combined coldness and fascination of the well-modulated voice, and as his clear eyes glanced at the man's features, he found himself reflecting inconsequently, that it was just such a face as this that had power to stir women's hearts, and awake their love.

A certain imperiousness marked the stranger's bearing, but Giles felt instinctively that it was the imperiousness of one born to master, not the cultivated hauteur of a lesser personality. The face was very handsome—and if the chiselling of the features showed something of the coldness of marble—Giles nevertheless recognised their undoubted fascination. The eyes—blue and clear—cold as ice,

keen as steel—had an oddly compelling power, which the young man recognised, though he recognised it reluctantly. Meeting those eyes, he experienced the curious sensation of having gone back to his earliest youth, and being in the presence of his commanding officer.

He found himself almost unconsciously trying to throw off the influence of the elder man, and his voice took on a curt accent as he said—

"Without any unduly precipitate action, I think I can do something for that poor lady," and leaving the tall stranger's side, he bent over the prostrate and still unconscious woman, lifting her head gently from the dust of the road, and resting it upon one of the carriage cushions, which had been tossed amongst the splinters of wood and iron.

"Won't mother ever open her eyes?" the child's trembling voice whispered in his ear; "why must she lie here in the road—so still and white?" and once more the small clinging hands clutched at his. His heart went out in a passion of pity and tenderness towards the frightened little girl, and he drew her towards him, with a gesture of kindliness and protection.

"A doctor will come soon," he said, "it is safer to let her lie here until we know whether she is—hurt or no. She is not in pain now," he added, looking down at the face that was so terribly white

and still, "we will wait patiently, just a few moments, and then—the doctor will come—and help her."

The child drank in his words eagerly, her great wistful eyes riveted on his face, whilst his were fixed upon the injured woman. She was young still, certainly not more than two or three and thirty he imagined; and in spite of her deathlike whiteness, the face that lay against the green cushion was very lovely. Long, dark lashes swept the cheek, cloudy masses of dark hair, loosened by her fall, fell about her neck, the curves of her mouth were of great sweetness, whilst a certain pathetic droop in their lines, gave to the whole face an expression of most pathetic sadness.

What was the life-history of the poor soul? Giles speculated. What tragedy had drawn that sweet mouth into such pathetic lines, and set such a stamp of sorrow upon her loveliness? Why had those fine crowsfeet been traced about her eyes, giving him the certainty that she had shed many and bitter tears? Why——

With that word still in his mind, he lifted his head, and glanced up at the tall man, who had remained standing in precisely the same attitude as before—and he saw that the stranger's eyes were also fixed upon the unconscious woman's face. But there was no compassion in their glance, it was hard and pitiless, and Giles could almost have sworn that a sardonic

smile hovered over the well-cut lips, that something of actual dislike and repugnance showed itself on the handsome features. A little sense of bewilderment clouded the young man's mind. He rose to his feet, and gently loosening the clasp of the child's hands from his, moved to the other man's side.

"Do you know this lady?" he said quickly, speaking, as before, in French. "The child with her seems to be English, do you know who they are?"

The stranger lifted his eyebrows with a gesture of extreme surprise, his shoulders went up in the movement that Tredman had begun to look upon as characteristic of him.

"I? How should I know them?" was the reply; "their pony carriage met my car — I have had the supreme misfortune to—destroy the carriage and injure the lady. But — we — are as one of your poets has said, 'Ships that pass in the night, and hail each other in passing.' Voilà tout."

Giles's quick ear noted that the man's English was as faultless as his French, though, from the orders given to the chauffeur, he judged him to be Russian.

"I beg your pardon," he said involuntarily, "I fancied—you looked at the lady as if you knew her.

No doubt her little girl will be able to tell us who they are, and where they live."

"Is monsieur then preparing to make himself responsible for his countrywoman?" the sardonic smile seemed to have translated itself into words, the blue eyes looked into Giles's grey ones, with a hint of amused contempt, that made the younger man long to strike the cold, handsome face.

"Whether she is my countrywoman or no, I could not do less than help her to the best of my power," he answered, a ring of indignation in his vóice; "the little girl cannot make arrangements, or take any responsibility. But no doubt you will do all that can be done for both mother and daughter, seeing that you——"

"That I—what?" the other interrupted with a sudden haughty gesture, and a quick drawing together of his brows, "that—I—what—monsieur?"

"That you were responsible for the accident, I was about to say," Giles answered, surprised at the resentment shown by his companion.

An uneasy laugh broke from the man's lips—he glanced along the road towards Aix, and something of his sangfroid seemed all at once to have deserted him.

"Nothing would please me more than to do everything possible for—madame and the little girl," he said, "but—the doctor once here, and—the case put

into the hands of the authorities—I must reluctantly go on my way. I have business of urgent, of vital importance—and I dare not let anything interfere with it. I shall be obliged——"

His sentence ended abruptly—the throb of the returning motor became audible, and in another moment, the great car, painted black, as Tredman now realised for the first time, drew up at the scene of the disaster. A brisk French doctor alighted, and glanced about him with bright, inquisitive eyes that instantaneously took in the whole situation, and rested on the Englishman's quiet face with an evident sense of relief.

"If monsieur will help me," he said, addressing himself to Tredman, "I will ascertain the extent of the injuries, and then madame can no doubt be conveyed to Aix in the motor," the last words he spoke to the owner of the car, who still stood in the same immobile attitude which he had throughout adopted. Both men bowed in response, and Tredman and the French doctor were soon bending over the injured woman, intent upon their task.

"We must get her back to her hotel, or wherever she lives as fast as possible," the doctor murmured, after a brief examination; "she—" his eyes met Tredman's, and he lowered his voice as he caught sight of the child's anguished face, "she is terribly hurt, crushed—nearly to death—and——"

There was a faint movement of the woman's hand, the hand upon whose pulse the doctor's finger had just rested, and at the same instant her eyes opened, dark wells of eyes, clouded now by an agony of pain.

"Tell—him—to—go," she gasped, "I—cannot—bear——" Only a breathless gasp ended her sentence, her lips grew more ashen, a grey shade crept over her face.

"We must not delay," the Frenchman said hurriedly, "if you will help me lift her into the car, we will get her as fast as we dare within reach of nurses and remedies, though she is almost past——"

His sentence remained unfinished. There was the noise of crunching wheels behind them, the throb of machinery, the whiz and shriek of the moving motor. And before either of the kneeling men could spring to his feet, before either could intervene to hinder the dastardly action, the black car was whirling along the road at headlong speed—a cloud of thick dust obscuring its inmates and its number—every second carrying it further out of reach of its hapless victims, and of those who had come to their rescue. Englishman and Frenchman looked at one another, and in the eyes of each was the same horror, the same dismay, and both swore under their breath. The Frenchman first recovered his power of speech.

"Is the man a monster in human shape?" he cried, "he is not a human being."

"He is a devil," Tredman answered, between his teeth, "a cold-blooded heartless fiend, he is a devil, and if ever I meet him again, he shall have his deserts."

"I—shall be almost sorry for that man if ever you meet him again," the little Frenchman answered slowly, "and now—we must devise some other means of getting this poor lady into safety and shelter."

CHAPTER II.

"I TRUST HER TO YOU."

In the long hotel dining-room Sir Giles Tredman sat waiting for his dinner, at the small table in the corner, from which he could see the full length of the long room. His mind was filled with the events of the afternoon, and a passion of pity and anger surged within him, as he thought of the injured woman and her little child, and of the dastardly man who, having hurt her to the death, could drive callously away, leaving her to her fate. After long delay he and the kindly young French doctor had obtained a vehicle, in which the poor lady had been conveyed to her hotel (the same one at which he himself had arrived only that morning from Florence); he had brought in an English doctor in consultation, and an English nurse to do all that could be done for the patient. But both medical men had shaken their heads, and expressed the simultaneous opinion that no nursing, and no doctor's help, could by any

possibility save her life. Her injuries were of such a nature that neither surgical nor medical aid would be of the least avail; it could only be a question of time, and probably of a very short time, before the inevitable end.

"She is barely conscious," the English doctor said to Tredman, who had waited in the hotel lounge to speak to him and his French colleague, "she seems to know that poor little girl of hers, but I have not been able to ask her any questions as to her identity, or whether she would wish to have any relations sent for. No one from England could in any case reach her in time," he added gravely.

"The hotel people tell me her name is Burnett; that she and the child have been here for some weeks whilst she took the cure; and that they have no friends in the place," was Tredman's reply. "I felt that one ought to find out all that was possible about the poor thing. But—what a tragedy!"

"What a tragedy, indeed," Dr. Somers repeated —and "what a tragedy!" Tredman found himself saying again, whilst the waiter placed a soup plate before him, and he began mechanically to eat his soup. His kindly heart ached for the child, whose eyes, deep with anguish, had looked at him with such a world of appeal in their depths,

whose hands had clung to him so desperately, as though in his strong presence she had felt a certainty of help.

"Poor little soul," he thought, "I hope to heaven there is a kind aunt, or friend or somebody who will come out and look after her. If the mother dies to-night, as the doctors seem sure she will, what is to become——"

His thoughts broke off abruptly, as the door at the far end of the salle-à-manger opposite his table opened, and a small figure, hesitating for a moment only on the threshold, came slowly down the room, looking from side to side at the little tables where sat the chattering, laughing guests. Tredman was on his feet directly; he had recognised in the small figure the daughter of the dying woman upstairs, and long before she had completed her slow progress he was by her side.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked; "were you looking for somebody?"

"I was looking for you," she answered, her eyes gazing up at him with that anguished expression which had been haunting him for hours, "the nurse sent me to fetch you. She says, please will you come at once," as the child spoke she slipped a little cold hand into Giles's, and his own big brown one closed over it with a protecting clasp, that seemed to bring a touch of comfort to the forlorn child, for

the ghost of a smile crossed her face, and she shrank closer to him, saying—

"The nurse is kind—but—she frightens me. Please will you take care of me."

Giles's grey eyes glanced kindly down into the uplifted face, his smile gave her new heart. Young things always loved Giles—his innate simplicity and kindliness of soul appealed to them, and he never failed to attract the shyest and most shrinking of children.

"Of course I'll take care of you," he answered gently, the subtle note of strength in his voice having a soothing effect upon the trembling little creature, "you must tell me if you have any uncles or aunts who would come out to you here, now that your mother is so—so—ill," he added, as they went up the long staircase, still hand in hand, "perhaps — there is someone your mother would like to see?"

The child shook her head.

"I don't think we've got any relations," she said, "we never seemed to have anybody who belonged to us, not like other people do," her tones were wistful, "mother and I are always by ourselves—just we two."

"Perhaps, you have some friends here," Giles hazarded, but again his companion shook her dark head.

"We don't know anybody here. Mother says

she would rather we didn't have friends, and she doesn't like me to know other little girls. You see—mother's always very sad," she went on with a curious old-fashioned solemnity, "so she likes us to be by ourselves best—just we two." The repetition of that phrase "just we two" struck Giles as infinitely pathetic, in view of the present condition of one of the two; and a lump crept into his throat, as he remembered that if the doctor's verdict was a correct one—the hours were numbered in which the child by his side would be able to speak in that tender little voice of "just we two." What would life be for her, when she had to face it alone? What was to become of the child, whose mother was the centre of her world, when that mother was taken from her? He was still deep in those thoughts, when his guide paused before a door at the end of the passage, and turned the handle with infinite care; lest any sound should disturb the sick woman within.

"The nurse said I was to take you straight to mother," she whispered, drawing him into the room with her, and shutting the door softly behind them. The room in which Giles found himself was very small, one of those at the back of the hotel, looking down into an enclosed courtyard, and furnished as meagrely as was compatible with being furnished at all. A nurse stood beside the one small table,

measuring some medicine into a glass, and glancing at her face, Giles at once understood why the child had expressed fear of the woman. Her face was hard, her eyes unsympathetic, and her thin lips pressed tightly together, showed no sign of sweetness or gentleness of temper. She looked up quickly as the young man and the child entered together, then nodded towards the bed.

"I thought I had better send for you," she said curtly, in an undertone, "you are the only person in the hotel who knows anything about her—and it can't last long now. She is quite conscious."

Something in the hard, level tones roused all Tredman's resentment against the speaker. She showed none of the womanliness, none of the softness, that the circumstances seemed to demand; her cold eyes passed from the still figure on the bed, to the little girl who was crossing the room towards it, with no more kindly feeling than might have been evinced by a creature of stone.

"She has told you of no one she would like to see? No friends? No relations?" Tredman spoke in lowered tones, but he could not keep a stern note out of them, the nurse's cold lack of sympathy angered him.

"She has told me nothing," the woman shrugged her shoulders, "she lies there and looks at the child,

with those great dark eyes of hers, till she makes me feel quite uncanny."

"She has told you nothing?"

"Nothing. She lies there, and stares and stares, until she makes me shiver. And I—am not usually sensitive," she laughed a low, cold laugh, and set down the medicine glass.

"But—the doctor? Dr. Somers? It would be better to send for him. Surely she might like to tell him her wishes, to give him some directions, to——"

"Dr. Somers has been sent for into the country, to an Englishman who is desperately ill. He will not be back in time to see Mrs. Burnett alive again," still the same callous, frigid tones in the low voice; "before I told the little girl to fetch you, I asked Mrs. Burnett whether she would like to see you. She said yes. I did not wish to be left with the sole responsibility of it all, and you were the Englishman present at the accident, were you not?"

"Certainly I was—and if I can help—I——"

"She is beckoning to you now," the nurse interrupted, with a glance towards the bed, and Giles, looking in the same direction, saw that the dying woman's hand was lifted, and was making a weak sign to him. He was by her bedside in a second, and his hand fell over hers with a reassuring touch.

"Tell me if there is anything I can do for you," he said, going straight to the point, because he instinctively realised that the sands of her life were running very low. His voice was hushed and gentle, some soothing quality in it seemed to comfort the woman, whose dark eyes held such a depth of anguish as wrung Giles' heart.

"He—has—killed—me," she panted out, one of her hands moving restlessly over the sheet, whilst the other touched the dark hair of the child who knelt beside her, "he—killed—my soul—now he has killed my body." Giles looked at her doubtfully. Her strange and apparently meaningless words, made him fancy she must be delirious, and when he spoke again, it was more slowly, more gently than before.

"I am afraid you and your little girl are alone here. Would you like me to send for any relations—any friends?"

"There—is—no one to send for," she said. "Sylvia and I—have no friends—we—are alone—just she and I."

"Just she and I." It was a repetition of the phrase the child had used, and Giles noticed how the thin hand on the sheet closed convulsively, as though the sick woman suddenly realised the intense loneliness in which she and her child lived.

"My darling," the dark eyes turned towards the kneeling child, the faint voice took on a tender inflexion, "go—and fetch me—the little ivory box, I want to—ask—this gentleman," she paused, and her breath came in more painful gasps, "will—you help me?" she ended, after a moment, looking wistfully into Giles' face.

"To the best of my ability," he answered solemnly, intent only on calming her, on trying to take some of the haunting anguish out of her eyes.

Sylvia rose from her knees, and stole across the room to a big trunk in the corner, and directly she had left the bedside, her mother laid a shaking hand on the young man's arm, in an evident attempt to draw him nearer to her. He bent his head, until his ear was close to her lips, and her hand closed over his in a tight grasp.

"Listen," she panted, "I—wanted to speak to you—alone—you look—strong and—good—and—there are so few good men in the world. I—" she turned her head restlessly, "I—have known—so much evil—so—much—evil." The sentence ended in a weary sigh, and her eyes closed, only to open again immediately with a startled stare. "What is it?" she whispered, "where—am—I? Is it the end? The end—and I—am so tired—so very tired—only—there is Sylvia—my little Sylvia—she and I——"

"Is there something you would like me to do for her?" Giles interrupted, seeing that she seemed to be wandering incoherently, fearing lest the end of which she spoke should come before she had told him of her wishes.

"Take care of her," the dark eyes flashed into his, "for—God's sake—take care of her, she—is so lonely—be good to my little girl."

The hand that still rested on his clutched at it desperately, the note of agony in the tired voice made the young man feel that he must do anything, promise anything, to give the dying woman peace at the last.

"Take care of her?" The voice was fainter, the accents were more insistent, and the eyes fixed on Giles' face were hungry with anxious longing.

"I will do my best to take care of her," he whispered back, gravely and slowly, his eyes meeting fully those sad eyes, "whatever I can do for her—I will do."

"You swear it?"

"I—swear—it." Almost involuntarily he uttered the words, feeling impelled to speak them because of the hunger in the mother's face; because of the weakening pressure of her hand. The intense relief that flashed into her eyes, seemed to him at the moment sufficient reward for what he had done, but

thoughts and sensations were alike confused by the strangeness of his surroundings, and by the suddenness of the request that had been made to him.

For an instant there was silence in the room upon whose threshold death already waited, and in the silence, Sylvia's soft steps could be heard returning towards the bed.

"Stoop—close—to me—again," the dying woman commanded. "I—have—something—to tell—you—that no one else must hear. In the box—the ivory box," her voice was very faint now, so faint that Giles could barely catch her words, even though he was bending close above her, "there—is—the—jewel. It—is the—clue—the only clue—never—lose—it—never let—him—know—that she—that—she——"

The voice ceased, the clutch on his hand relaxed, and a spasm of dismay went through Giles's heart. He must be told more than that. He must know to whose care he was to commit this child who was being given into his hands. Of course her mother was only intending to ask him to take care of her until she could be given over to her lawful guardians: he must be sure of their names, there was so much he ought to know, before Sylvia's mother went away into the Silent Land. The thoughts flashed like lightning through his brain, and his hand closed again over the

limp fingers, that had just relaxed their clutching hold upon his.

"Tell me," he said, very slowly, very clearly, his whole will set on making the words penetrate to her failing senses, "tell me who is to take charge of your little girl?"

"Do — not—let — him — take — her — to — kill —soul—and——" The weak voice barely whispered the broken sentence, then trailed into silence, and Giles looked despairingly into the still face, over which the greyness of death was settling fast.

"Can you tell me of anyone to whom you would like me to take your little girl?" he repeated his question, with a different form of words, but no answer came from those just parted lips, through which each faintly drawn breath seemed to come with greater and greater difficulty. The nurse had left the table, and was standing at her patient's side, opposite Giles, mechanically wiping the gathering sweat from the brow of the dying woman. She leant a little towards the young man, saying in an undertone—

"She is almost gone. I do not think she can hear you any more."

"But she must hear me," Giles said desperately, "I must know what she wishes, what she would like—before——"

Whether the sound of whispering voices disturbed the almost unconscious patient, or whether her own mother love and anxiety of mind, brought her back for the flash of a second from the dim border-land between life and death, who can tell? But all at once her dark eyes opened, and looked fully into Giles' bewildered face. The anguish had left them, and in its stead there shone a wonderful triumphant gladness.

"I—am—not—afraid—now," each word dropped from her lips in almost inaudible tones, "I—trust—her—to you—you—are—" there was a long long pause, in which each difficult breath grew more difficult, "you—are—the soul—of honour—I—trust—her—" and then the faint tones and the faint breathing ceased together, ceased utterly, and the nurse, looking silently down into the still face, slowly closed the dark eyes, whose last look of gladness seemed to Giles almost like a benediction.

The child was on her knees again beside the bed, her hands close clasped about the dead woman's arm, her face pressed against the pillow, and upon the coverlet lay the box which her mother had sent her to fetch, a box of carved ivory, whose yellow colouring showed in sharp contrast to the white of the bedclothes.

"You had better take the little girl into another

room," the nurse's voice broke the silence, her frigid tones giving Giles a sense of something alien and incongruous, "there is nothing more she can do here." Sylvia lifted her head, and looked, first at the face on the pillow, then across at the pitying face opposite to her. The child's pitiful effort at self-control brought a choking sensation into Giles' throat, the agony in her deep eyes stabbed his heart. Her small white face was quite pinched and drawn, but though her lips quivered, they were set in a determined line, which seemed to him to indicate extraordinary strength of character in one so young.

"Come," he said, very gently, rising and going round to her side of the bed, and laying his hand on her shoulder, "come away with me for a little while."

She rose obediently, but her eyes turned back to her mother's face.

"I—may come again?" she whispered, with a catch in her voice, "mother and I—haven't ever been away from each other."

Giles' eyes grew dim, it was several seconds before he could find voice to answer.

"You shall come back presently," he said, very shakily, "only let me take you now to see if we can find a lady who will—be kind to you." He had led her outside into the passage, and in his mind he had determined to seek out an old Englishwoman, whose

motherly face had attracted his attention in the drawing-room. But Sylvia stopped dead, looking up at him with startled, appealing eyes.

"I don't want to go to any lady," she exclaimed breathlessly, "please let me just stay with you, or—if I can't do that, let me be by myself. I'd rather be by myself, please, than with any lady."

His instinctively sympathetic nature told Giles that the child shrank intolerably from contact with any other woman, whilst the realisation of her mother's loss was so fresh and bitter, and—leaving her alone for a moment, he hurried away to find the hotel proprietor, and to engage a room in which the sorrowing child could be alone.

"You are sure you would not like me to send anyone to you?" Giles asked her, when the room had been put at her disposal. "You know," he hesitated, "you are in my care for the present, and you must tell me everything you want."

"I—don't want anything," she answered, "only—mother," her voice broke in a sob, "please—may I go back to mother presently? I—think—she must be lonely without me."

"I will come to take you back soon," Giles drew the little trembling thing towards him, with a sudden longing to protect and comfort her, "your mother asked me—to take care of you—and——"

"Did mother want me to be your little girl then?"

she asked, and Giles, all his chivalrous tenderness stirred by the wistful, shaking voice, answered gently:

"Yes—I think—perhaps—that was what she meant. Just now—just for the present, at any rate, you will be my little girl."

CHAPTER III.

THE JEWEL.

THE funeral was over. The woman with the strangely beautiful face, the woman whose death had been such a tragedy, whose life seemed to have been surrounded by mystery, was laid to rest in the little foreign cemetery that lies under the shadow of great brooding mountains in the sunshine of Savoy. Many of the English, both from her own hotel, and from other hotels in the place, and a large concourse of kindly French folk, followed the strange little cortège to the grave, for the accident had stirred the little town to its depths, whilst the callous brutality of the man who had caused such a tragedy and then left his victim to her fate, had roused a storm of indignation in the whole countryside. Woe betide the owner of that powerful black motor, if he ever again showed himself within many miles of Aix. There was nothing but kindly sympathy for the lonely little child, who, with a tall young man followed

close behind the flower-laden coffin, and when the service was ended, many people pressed forward to speak to Giles and his charge. But Sylvia's shaking hands, her eyes bright with unshed tears, and wide with anguish, told the young man that she could bear no more, and with a brief word of explanation to those who meant so kindly, he hurried the child into their waiting carriage, and drove quickly back to the hotel. The necessary haste with which everything had taken place, the comparatively short time that the French law allows to elapse between a death and a burial, the countless arrangements he had been forced to make, had all combined to put in the background the important question which now had to be faced. What was to be done in the future with the child so strangely and so suddenly thrust upon his hands? What steps ought he to take for Sylvia's welfare? What could he do? What ought he to do? It was a sufficiently difficult problem to be faced by a young man of barely twenty-six, and a problem not rendered less difficult, by his discovery that Mrs. Burnett had evidently been something of a pariah amongst her fellow countrymen and women. The old lady whose motherly face had attracted Tredman's attention on the day of his arrival, stiffened into a far from motherly being, when he haltingly laid before her some of his perplexities.

"My dear Sir Giles," she said, smoothing her silk gown with plump fingers that seemed to her companion the embodiment of all that was self-satisfied and sleek, "we all came to that unfortunate creature's funeral, because we felt outraged that a fellow countrywoman should have been killed in that abominable way. And we were sorry for the poor child, too. But take my advice, and what I am sure will be the advice of every rational being, and have nothing more to do with the little girl than you can possibly help."

"But why——" Tredman began, only to be cut short instantly by Mrs. Denham's decisive tones.

"That child's mother lived entirely apart, entirely cut off from *everybody*, French and English," she said; "we know she called herself Mrs. Burnett, but what her real name was, nobody has the slightest idea. She posed as a widow——"

"But mightn't she really have been a widow called Burnett?" Giles managed to put in, hotly indignant at the aspersion against the dead woman.

"She might—but she was not," Mrs. Denham answered shortly, "there does not happen to be the least doubt that she was living here under an assumed name, in deadly poverty, and—apparently in hiding."

"In *hiding?* From what?" Tredman's anger showed itself in his voice.

"Ah! That is precisely what we can't make out; but there was something extremely queer and fishy about her, and, do let me beg you to take my advice. I am old enough to be your mother, and I am sure your mother would say, as I do, 'have nothing to do with this child.' Send her to an orphan asylum; let the authorities hunt up her belongings, and arrange for her future. But don't have anything to do with it yourself."

A swift vision of his own mother flitted before Giles' mind. She had died when he was a little boy, but he could remember her sweet eyes, her tender voice, even some of the words she had spoken to him. And some of those words came back to him now, in a sudden flash of recollection.

"Never judge harshly, my little son, and especially never judge a woman harshly, and be very gentle always to everything weaker than yourself." The vision of his mother's face faded. Instead of it he saw Sylvia's small white face, and big sorrowful eyes; he felt the touch of her trembling hands, and heard her wistful voice saying, "Did mother want me to be your little girl then?" And again there swept over him a hot wave of resentment against the complacent woman, who still smoothed out her silk gown with her plump be-ringed hands.

"Even supposing that anything could be proved against the poor lady who is no longer here to defend herself," Tredman said stiffly, "I quite fail to see why her innocent child should be harmed. A little girl of ten is not a very dangerous person." The sarcasm of his tones passed unheeded by the obtuse Mrs. Denham, who only shook her head in response, saying solemnly—

"Like mother, like daughter, you know, and in any case, Sir Giles, forgive me if I say that it cannot ever be wise to mix one's self with such doubtful people as these Burnetts. You know nothing of the child's antecedents, excepting what everybody declares, that her mother was a mere adventuress, and in hiding. Why—ten to one—she was not even married at all," the virtuous lady ended, casting her eyes upwards. Tredman's mouth set itself in a mutinous curve, which those who knew him well, would have said signified an unflinching determination to go his own way at all costs. And even the very obtuse lady who sat beside him in the hotel salon, realised at last that her words were falling on barren soil.

"In all that you have said, I still fail to see any reason for showing lack of humanity to her little girl," Giles said coldly, "I have not yet had time to go into the question of future arrangements for her; but—I have no intention of

handing her over either to the authorities, or to an orphan asylum."

His conversation with the well-meaning Mrs. Denham recurred to him with full force an hour later, when with Sylvia beside him, he sat at the table in the room where her mother had died, and looked at the strange assortment of things she had spread out upon it. He had asked her to show him any of her mother's papers, or especial treasures, explaining to her that it was his duty to try and discover whether she had any near relations with whom he ought to communicate, and hoping that amongst the dead lady's effects he might be able to find something that would help him in his plans for the child.

"That's all mother had," she said, looking from the pile upon the table into his puzzled face, "mother and me didn't have many things, we were so very poor. Mother sold all her pretties, only she said we weren't never to sell the one in the ivory box." Her fingers pushed towards Giles that same carved box, of yellow and discoloured ivory, which the young man had last seen upon the bed of the dying woman, and the sight of it brought vividly to his mind the white beautiful face on the pillow, and the anguished eyes that had looked so appealingly into his. Triumphant gladness had only replaced the anguish when he had promised—solemnly promised to take care of the

child she was leaving—and glancing down now at the little girl's dark head, a sudden realisation came to him of the weighty charge he had undertaken. It behoved him to find out, and to find out with no further delay, into whose safe keeping he could deliver Sylvia, for that somewhere in the world she must possess relations who would be responsible for her, he had never really doubted.

"We will look first into the ivory box," he said cheerily, "there is—some special treasure there, you say. I think I remember—your mother mentioned a jewel—which—my God!" His sentence broke off abruptly with this amazed exclamation, as Sylvia's fingers unlocked the box, and drew from it what seemed to his startled eyes like a flashing mass of precious stones.

"Mother said we mustn't ever part with this," the child said quietly, laying the scintillating loveliness before Giles, and looked with surprise into his astonished face.

"Part with it?" he stammered, "but—how on earth—I mean—where did your mother get this? I never saw anything like it."

"Mother said there wasn't anything else like it," Sylvia answered, "and I like the way it shines."

"You like the way it shines, do you, little girl?" Giles laughed, a trifle grimly; "well, it certainly

shines very prettily, and—good heavens, it must be worth a king's ransom," he added, picking up the jewel and looking at it more closely. It had appeared to him at first to be a pendant, but on nearer inspection he observed that it was designed to be worn as either pendant or brooch, and he drew in his breath sharply, as he examined the size and magnificence of the stones of which it was composed. In the centre was an enormous emerald, of vividly brilliant colouring, surrounded by diamonds which his judgment told him were of exceptional size and value. And hanging from these by a fine chain of brilliants was a small locket, encrusted with brilliants and emeralds.

The veriest ignoramus could not have failed to recognise that the whole exquisite piece of jewellery was most unique and beautiful, and Giles—layman though he was—had sufficient knowledge of precious stones, to be aware that what lay in his hand now must be worth an incalculably large sum of money.

"You don't know—how—I mean, you can't tell me where your mother got this lovely thing?" he asked again, trying to speak quietly.

"Mother's had it always, I think," Sylvia answered; "when I was a tiny baby she sometimes showed it to me. I can't ever remember her not having it, and she said it was very precious, and I must always

take great care of it, and not show it to anybody, until I was quite big. Only it's different showing it to you, isn't it?" she added wistfully; "she told me to fetch it and show it to you, that night when—" her lips quivered, and she broke off abruptly; "and besides—I belong to you now, don't I?" she finished, with a little tremulous smile.

"Yes—you belong to me now," he answered kindly, his hand resting for a moment on her dark soft hair, "until we find some really nice belongings of your own, that is to say. We must look through the papers your mother has left, and see whether we can find anything about her people and yours."

"We haven't got any people," came the gentle answer; "mother and I didn't have anybody belonging to us, only each other."

"And—your father?" Giles hesitated over the question, and his eyes did not meet the innocent child eyes uplifted to his.

"I can't remember my father," she said, "mother couldn't ever bear me to ask about him; it made her very unhappy if I did, so I don't even know what he was like."

"You have no picture of him?" Sylvia shook her head.

"I believe it would have hurt mother if she had had his picture," was the grave answer, "she used

to say she couldn't bear to remember his face, because it hurt her to think he had gone away from her for ever."

"And"—Giles hesitated again—"have you always lived away from England?"

"I can only just remember England. We lived once in a beautiful house, very big and very grand, and I was quite, quite tiny, but I remember something about that great house, and about mother all in white clothes, with lots and lots of shiny stones in her hair, and round her neck. But after that we came away—and we have lived in different places since then—and always in rooms like this in a hotel, or in a lodging. And mother hasn't ever worn white frocks or shiny stones again."

"And all the papers your mother had are in this?" Giles laid his hand upon a shabby leather desk, which lay on the table beside the ivory box. "There are no others anywhere? No letters, no writing of any sort?"

"No—nothing more. We only had that one big box with all our things in it," Sylvia nodded towards a trunk in the corner, "and mother kept all her papers in this desk." The child handed Tredman a key, and with reluctant fingers Giles unlocked the desk, and drew from it a small bundle of papers, which he unfolded one by one, feeling a shrinking repugnance from touching the property of the dead

woman, yet knowing it was imperative that he should master the contents of the desk. But his task completed, he found himself no nearer than before to any information respecting Mrs. Burnett's antecedents or belongings. The papers were, for the most part, trivial and valueless. A few paid bills, a few letters in a spidery, old-fashioned hand, beginning "My darling child," ending "Your loving mother," and bearing dates of many years before; and a letter in a strong and very characteristic man's hand. But none of the letters gave to the reluctant reader what he had hoped to find. Not one bore any address; the mother's letters were mere chit-chat about current events interesting to writer and reader; the man's letter was a passionate love letter, and its signature gave no clue to the writer's identity, consisting, as it did, of the one word, "Yours."

"Her lover—or—her husband, no doubt," the thought went through Giles' mind, as, with a sigh, he refolded the letters, and put them back into the elastic band that held them. Only one small document remained in the desk, and the young man's eyes brightened, as upon the half sheet of paper he read the words—"My last will and testament. JOAN BURNETT." But disappointment again awaited him. The will was absolutely

informal—he wondered whether legally it would carry any weight at all. It was worded thus—"I, Joan Burnett, give and bequeath to Sylvia Mary, my only child, everything of which I die possessed, including the ivory box and its contents. She must never part with this until the day comes."

At the end of the strange and apparently meaningless sentence, came the signature, Joan Burnett, followed by those of two witnesses—Jean Martean, Marie Cochot. The two names were scrawled across the page, and both were evidently hotel servants, for after their names came the words, "domestique" and the address of an hotel in a remote French town. The date was that of two years previously. And these were all the contents of the desk, this was the sum total of the papers upon which Giles had based so many hopes. He looked down at Sylvia with an oddly bewildered expression in his eyes, as he gathered all the letters and the will together, and put them back in their place.

"I can find no clue to anything or anybody," he said, thinking aloud rather than speaking to the child, "I—don't know what to be at next."

"Then, I suppose," she answered in her quaint fashion, slipping her small hand into his, "I suppose I'll really and truly have to be your little girl, if

there isn't anybody else I belong to. And, if you don't mind very much, I'd rather belong to you; we like each other, don't we, you and I, and I'd rather belong to you than to anybody else in the world, now that mother isn't here to take care of me any more."

CHAPTER IV.

GRACE CARDEW.

"GILES has apparently taken leave of his senses."

"Why?" Mrs. Cardew glanced up from her own voluminous correspondence, to look across at her daughter, who had just flung down a newly-received letter with the above remark.

"He writes me a long rigmarole from Aix les Bains, explaining why he didn't reach England at the end of last week, as he meant to do. And the explanation——" Grace Cardew paused, picked up the letter from her lap, and laughed, a short laugh of scorn and disgust.

"Well, Grace, but what is the explanation? And why do you say Giles has taken leave of his senses. Surely he does not wish to break off your engagement?" A note of acute uneasiness suddenly shot into her voice.

"No, of course not." Grace's accents were more irritable than before. "You always jump to such

extraordinary conclusions, my dear mother. If anybody breaks off the engagement, it is much more likely that I shall do it than that Giles will."

"What do you mean?" A genuinely startled expression crossed Mrs. Cardew's face, her eyes searched her daughter's features with undisguised anxiety.

"I always knew Giles was a sort of absurd Don Quixote, who would tilt at a windmill at a moment's notice, but goodness, I would rather he tilted at every windmill in Holland, than that he should contemplate the absurdity he seems to be contemplating."

"If you would tell me what the absurdity is, I should be a better judge of the whole thing," Mrs. Cardew said drily, "you only sit there abusing poor Giles, without telling me what he has done to deserve your abuse. When is he to arrive in England?"

"Oh, on Thursday. *Poor* Giles comes on Thursday, bringing with him—prepare for a shock—a little girl of ten, whose mother was killed at Aix."

"Bringing what?" Mrs. Cardew's voice rose to a little scream.

"You see I didn't exaggerate Giles' folly," Grace said sharply. "Giles writes a long story about a

Mrs. Burnett, who seems to have been killed in a motor accident, though what it all has to do with Giles I can't imagine. He wasn't in the car. He was in no way responsible for the woman's death, but he must needs take upon himself to look after this Mrs. Burnett's affairs, and he talks as if he meant to take permanent charge of her child."

"*Permanent charge?*" Mrs. Cardew sat up and gasped.

"I wish you wouldn't go on repeating my words," Grace exclaimed crossly. "Yes—permanent charge. He says the child is left without relations, friends, or money, and that he proposes bringing her to England, and making arrangements for her future. He seems to think"—she laughed ironically—"that I shall welcome the little stranger with open arms. He talks of our taking care of her together."

"My dear Grace!"

"Yes. He evidently fancies I shall jump for joy at the idea of having a child of ten to bring up. He speaks of this little girl—this Sylvia—making her home with us, and talks of my 'mothering' her. Oh! he is simply off his head," and Grace left her chair to pace up and down the drawing-room in Cromwell Road, pausing every now and then to inveigh against her fiancé, and his absurdity. She was a tall girl, graceful and erect of figure, and with

a handsome face, marred at this moment by a certain petulance of expression. Her eyes were very blue and very bright; her well-coiffured hair shone like spun gold as the sunlight fell upon it, and her colouring was that most dainty and exquisite colouring seldom seen out of England. Grace Cardew was an acknowledged beauty, and as the only child of a widowed mother, a spoilt one also, and for some minutes Mrs. Cardew listened rather helplessly to her daughter's indignant utterances. Then she said slowly—

"You are worrying yourself quite unnecessarily, Grace. Giles is so devoted to you, and so sure that all you say or think is right, that he is not in the least likely to do anything against your wishes. When he arrives, you can show him the folly of his quixotic ideas, and——"

"I am not so sure that Giles will be so amenable as you fancy. He can be simply pigheadedness itself, when he takes it into his head that a thing is right. He was like that before he left England, and my private impression is that he is ten thousand times worse now. He has most rigid principles." Grace stopped before a glass to put her fluffy hair in order, and look complacently at her own charming reflection, the sight of which restored some of her good humour.

"You are not getting tired of him, are you,

Grace?" Mrs. Cardew looked keenly at her daughter, and asked the question with an almost coarse disregard of reticence, which a girl of another fibre might well have resented. Not so Grace. She only laughed, and twisted herself a little more round, to get a better view of her own image in the glass.

"I should very soon get tired of living up to his level," she answered lightly, "but fortunately, I have no intention of trying to do it. Giles must come down to mine, or else——" She shrugged her shoulders, adding, "Ah, well, husbands and wives nowadays don't have to go each other's way. They can each go their own." Mrs. Cardew opened her lips to say that a man of Giles' character, would certainly expect his wife to go his way and no other, but she wisely refrained from uttering her thought, and said instead—

"When does Giles arrive?"

"On Friday or Saturday. His movements depend on this wretched child. He has found a French nurse to travel as far as Calais with them, and he talks of stopping a day or two in Paris, that Sylvia may *rest*. Then, he suggests finding an English lady, a governess, to take charge of the wretched little monkey until he and I are established at Manderby Court, and I, if you please—*I*—can have her there with me. Giles ought to have been a

knight errant, or something silly like that; he was born several centuries too late."

"Well, my dear, he will make a very good husband," Mrs. Cardew put in, a note of anxiety in her voice, for when Grace worked herself up into what her mother called "one of her takings," no one could ever foresee what the result would be, and the last result for which Mrs. Cardew wished was the breaking off of her daughter's engagement with Giles Tredman. Life for the last fourteen years (since her husband died and left her to face the world and bring up their only child, as best she might, on means of a very limited description) had been far from a bed of roses to Grace's mother. The struggle to make ends meet, to keep up appearances—to live as the rest of their world lived, without showing how such living pinched them, had drawn many wrinkles on her face, and given to her eyes a permanently careworn expression. And only she herself fully knew what an intense relief it would be, to see Grace safely married to a man who could take them both far out of reach of all poverty and discomfort. True, she had in the first place given very lukewarm approval to the engagement, but two years ago Giles had merely been plain Giles Tredman, possessing little more than his pay as an engineer officer, and with only a remote chance of succeeding to his rich uncle, Sir Philip. But

matters had changed since then. Giles was Sir Giles now, the owner of a very considerable fortune; the master of one of the most charming properties in Hampshire—an eligible amongst eligibles. And the bare thought that Grace, in a fit of temper, might throw over this most desirable young man, sent a cold thrill of dismay to her mother's soul.

"I don't doubt that Giles will make a good husband," Grace threw herself into the armchair again, and surveyed her own daintily-shod feet with a smile, "if anything, he will make much *too* good a husband. He will be jealous and tiresome if any other man pays me attention; he will expect me to play Lady Bountiful to a lot of detestable village people; I shall have to settle down into the humdrum existence of a country squire's wife, instead of——"

"Instead of—what?" Mrs. Cardew turned fully round upon her chair by her bureau, and looked at her daughter with a searching glance, in which there was all at once a significant question.

"Oh!—instead of—the sort of life I would like." Grace spoke with a sudden embarrassment, and stirred a little uneasily under the look in her mother's eyes. "I have always hankered after a—a cosmopolitan existence—London, Paris, Monte Carlo—lots of fun and—and—oh! I don't know—good

times all round," she ended rather lamely, a faint colour creeping into her cheeks, whilst her mother still looked at her with curious fixedness.

"Since when have you developed this taste for the cosmopolitan?" Mrs. Cardew's tones were dry. "Since you met that foreign man at the Digbys? Surely you are not silly enough to think——"

"To think what?" Grace was on her feet again, confronting her mother with angry eyes. "I know that 'foreign man,' as you call him, was extremely pleasant, and interested me more than most of the well-groomed, empty-headed men I meet every night manage to interest me. I don't think anything more about him, excepting that he was rather good-looking," she ended, with assumed carelessness, and a glib disregard for truth which failed to deceive her mother. Real anxiety showed itself in Mrs. Cardew's faded blue eyes, the eyes that long ago, must have been as bright as were her daughter's eyes now. She too, rose, and put a hand on Grace's shoulder.

"Giles may be what you call too good and too dull, and all the other things you have been calling him this evening, but at any rate we know all about him. And this foreign man—why—you know nothing about him excepting his name. He may be, he probably is, simply an adventurer."

"For an adventurer he goes to very good houses," Grace said scathingly, "and——"

"And though you may call him good-looking," Mrs. Cardew continued, not heeding her daughter's interruption, "his face is as hard as any face could be, and his eyes—they make me shiver when they look at me. They are like—like steel swords—steel swords," was her lame conclusion.

Grace laughed. "His eyes give me no out-of-the-way sensation, and don't agitate yourself about him, my dear mother. I find him a pleasant contrastto the everlasting flock of sheep to which all Englishmen belong. That is all. I intend to marry Giles, unless we fall out hopelessly over one of his quixotic fads. Meanwhile——"

"Mr. Müller!"

The parlourmaid's smooth voice broke into Grace's discourse, and her complete anglicising of the visitor's name, made both mother and daughter fail to imagine who the late arrival could be. But at sight of the tall form that a moment later blocked the doorway, Grace and her mother exchanged a quick glance, and Mrs. Cardew shivered a little. It seemed to her that the stranger's entrance, just at the precise moment when they had been discussing his personality, held in it something fateful, ominous, and when her eyes met his, as he bowed courteously and took her proffered hand,

she shivered again. The visitor was very tall, and, as Grace had said of him a few minutes earlier, very good-looking. No longer in his first youth, the few threads of grey in his dark hair seemed to enhance rather than detract from the handsomeness of his face. He was clean-shaven, save for a small dark moustache which did not hide the well-cut lips, and allowed the strong modelling of the chin and jaw to be clearly seen. In contrast with his dark hair and moustache, the colour of his eyes was almost startling, they were so vividly blue, and Mrs. Cardew, looking into them, was reminded again of her own simile of a moment earlier, "like steel swords." She repeated the phrase in her own mind, reflecting that those hard, clear eyes were more than ever like steel, the blue polished steel of a newly-tempered sword. But if Mr. Müller's eyes were hard, his smile had an extraordinary fascination —Mrs. Cardew was forced to admit so much—and his voice held in it such curiously fascinating cadences, that the elder lady found herself thinking that with so compelling a voice, this man could without difficulty persuade a woman to follow him round the world.

"I dared to come, even at this unseemly hour," the visitor was saying, glancing at the clock, whose hands pointed to six, "because I have just been given a box for the Marsyas Theatre to-night, and I

wondered whether I could induce you and Miss Cardew to come to my box with me, dining first at the Carlton ? "

Mrs. Cardew tried not to gasp. Outwardly, she was placid and smiling, whilst inwardly she wondered from whom she could possibly obtain any reliable information about this foreigner with the remarkably good English accent, who was showing such respectful but decided admiration for her beautiful daughter ?

" How very kind of you to have thought of us," she said, her words showing no sign of the tumult within her, " most fortunately we are not engaged to-night, and my daughter and I have been wishing to see the new play at the Marsyas. It is a very kind thought of yours."

No one knew better than Mrs. Cardew how to say thank you, gracefully, and despite all her warnings to her daughter against adventurers, she was fully aware that it would be impolitic to show anything but courtesy to a foreigner who was a friend of the Digbys. The Digbys' house was a centre of cosmopolitanism in London, and if occasionally one met there the most strange and weird of beings, a very large proportion of all that was best in European circles, also drifted into Mrs. Digby's drawing-room in Portman Square. And it was well, the astute lady reflected, to give to every foreigner who

frequented that particular drawing-room, the benefit of the doubt, especially when theatres and dinners at the Carlton weighed down the balance on the benefit side.

"We shall be a *partie carrèe*," Mr. Müller went on, in his musical voice. "I have ventured to ask a compatriot of mine, Mr. Schmidt, to be the fourth. He is a diplomatist of some standing; he knows your charming country well, and speaks its language fluently."

"Not more fluently than you do, surely?" Mrs. Cardew said with a smile, "I only wish I could speak your German tongue a quarter—a millionth part as well."

"My—German—tongue," a gleam of—what was it?—amusement, irony, or both, flashed into the blue, keen eyes, "is not easy for a foreigner to speak. But I"—again came a little hesitation—"I am—what you call—cosmopolitan. Almost every European language is equally easy to me. I am at home in them all, as I am at home in every country in Europe."

"You are a diplomat, too?" Grace's words were a question, and the stranger bent his head, whilst that flash of something shot again into his eyes.

"Yes, a diplomat," he answered, "a fascinating profession, mademoiselle. The pitting of wits against wits—the playing of card against card;

the continual strife that is always strife, however amicable. All these are like a game of the most fascinating kind. And modern diplomacy,"—he paused, looked from one lady to the other, and added deprecatingly, "but I am talking far too much about my own affairs."

"No, no, go on, please go on," Grace spoke quickly, her face had flushed, her eyes were shining; she looked very lovely, leaning forward a little, her lips half parted in her eagerness.

"I was going to say, modern diplomacy is so much more interesting than the older methods. Nowadays, we are all frankness itself, on the surface. Diplomats vie with each other in being open, in showing their hands, in saying 'you see—everything I have to show you,' whilst all the time we have our best cards up our sleeves, or—in our boots,—and, under the surface that looks so smooth and shining, there are, perhaps, unfathomable depths—perhaps whirlpools."

Grace caught her breath.

"It sounds delicious," she exclaimed, "I have always thought that if I were a man, I would choose diplomacy before any other profession. Fancy how lovely, to act frankness, and never really allow your opponent to know anything; to look straight into his eyes and all the time hide what was going on behind your own in your brain."

"You would have made a good diplomat, mademoiselle." The steely blue eyes suddenly flashed into those other blue ones that shone with suppressed excitement. "There is no better actress or diplomatist than a woman, if she sets her mind to it, and if she knows *how to hold her tongue.*"

"Oh! I can hold my tongue," Grace said, with a little catch in her breath again, because of something compelling, something she could not wholly fathom, in the glance of Mr. Müller's strange eyes. "I have never been a chatterbox."

"Never!" the visitor echoed gravely, his glance still fixed with odd intensity on the girl's lovely face, which flushed more deeply under his gaze, "but, I did not come here to discuss diplomacy," he broke off, rising and laughing pleasantly, "I came merely to bring my invitation, and to suggest that my motor should fetch you at seven, if that will be convenient." Mrs. Cardew's thanks were again gracious and profuse, though not over-profuse, and their visitor had almost reached the door, when he turned back with a short exclamation.

"I had nearly forgotten," he said, his eyes resting again on Grace's face, "Mrs. Digby tells me that the distinguished young soldier, Sir Giles Tredman, is fortunate enough to be betrothed to you," he bowed towards the girl, "and I wondered whether he had yet arrived in England, and if so, whether

you could persuade him to join us in our box to-night ?" Grace was not skilled enough in powers of observation, to notice how intent was the gaze that seemed to read her very thoughts, as Mr. Müller put this question, or to interpret the meaning of his sharply indrawn breath, when she replied—

"How very kind of you to think of it, but Sir Giles will not be in England till the end of the week."

CHAPTER V.

GILES' DECISION.

"It is my duty to put the thing before you in every light, and you must understand, Sir Giles, that if you persist in carrying out your plan, you lay yourself open to — well, to misconstruction."

Mr. Duncan, the solicitor who had not only done all the business of the Tredman estates for many years, but had also been a friend of Giles' uncle, the late baronet, looked across his mahogany table at the young man and gravely shook his grey head. Mr. Duncan was, and knew himself to be, a person of weight in his own very large circle; knew that his clients were accustomed to look upon his counsels as well balanced and worthy of being followed, was aware that his fund of experience and worldly wisdom made him a sure guide in matters of expediency, and therefore never doubted but that his present visitor would follow his advice without let

or hindrance. But Giles only repeated the lawyer's last words slowly, and thoughtfully.

"Lay myself open to misconstruction? Why? In what way?" he asked. "I am proposing to undertake formally the charge of a child who was left quite informally to my guardianship; how can so simple a thing be misconstrued?"

"The world is censorious," Mr. Duncan cleared his throat, and drew patterns on his blotting paper with his favourite pen, "I ought to warn you that if you make yourself legally and formally responsible for this little girl, the world will naturally ask what is your reason for doing it?"

"What reason?" Giles' grey eyes clouded with bewilderment. "It must surely be obvious to the densest mind, that common humanity prompts me to do my best for a child left in my care, under peculiarly tragic circumstances?"

"The world is less dense than malicious," Mr. Duncan replied. "A large proportion of mankind prefers to discover a low motive rather than a high one, in the actions of other people. It does not appear to have struck you," again he cleared his throat, "that people will say you are probably only doing tardy justice to a child for whom you ought always to have been responsible—who is, in fact, your own child."

A dark flush mounted to Giles' forehead, a flush

of indignation shot into his eyes, for a moment he was speechless, then he laughed shortly.

"Upon my soul, the world is a scurrilous place," he said at last, "such an interpretation of what seemed to me a very obvious line of conduct, never even entered my head, and——"

"But having entered it," Mr. Duncan interrupted smoothly, "you will surely let it have some influence upon your line of action?"

"If you mean that I shall alter what I intend to do, because a pack of scandal-mongers may let their own evil imaginings besmirch my conduct, then most emphatically, no. What you tell me will not make the slightest difference to my line of action."

"You mean——"

"I mean that, having weighed the whole thing thoroughly, and looked at it from all reasonable points of view, I intend to undertake the guardianship of the child known as Sylvia Burnett. Her mother, when dying, entrusted the child to my care, and as I am quite unable to discover any relations who have a better claim to her than I have, I propose, as I have already told you, to adopt her."

"But not to give her your name?" the lawyer interposed hastily, a swift wonder running through his mind whether his first dim suspicion about the

child could be correct, and whether Tredman was after all merely bluffing him. But a glance into the young man's quiet, indignant face, into the grey, steady eyes, gave the lawyer a sudden sense of shame—of revolt against his own base thoughts—and he sighed just a little, a sigh perhaps embodying regret that frequent dealings with the seamy side of life, had so clouded for him its loftier and more ideal aspects.

"You will not give the child your name?" he repeated.

"Certainly not. Why should I?" Faint surprise was in Giles' accents. "I still hope that I may some day come across her own people. Both her father and mother must have had *some* belongings, and though I gather that there was some great tragedy, perhaps worse, in Mrs. Burnett's past, no decent people would allow that to interfere with their treatment of her child. If I find any relations for Sylvia, they will surely condone whatever wrongs her mother may have done, and be good to her. Meanwhile, I make myself responsible for the poor little soul."

"You have taken every possible step to discover whether there are any relations who could relieve you of this burden."

"I have done everything I can think of, but quite without success. My advertisements have brought

no answers, I can find no trace of Mrs. Burnett's relations, or of where they lived."

"You know her maiden name?"

"No, there was not the least clue to it amongst any of her papers: there was nothing to give me any information about her, either in her papers, or in any of her possessions. She—" he hesitated, "she handed over to me, with her daughter, a very remarkable jewel, a jewel, I should imagine, of great value," again Tredman paused, to resume after a moment. "What I say to you I say to you of course in confidence" (Mr. Duncan bent his head in acquiescence), "the dying lady said some words to me when she spoke of that jewel, words which puzzled me at the time, and have puzzled me ever since."

"Can you remember them now?"

"Yes—oh! yes. They sound curiously incoherent and yet—I am sure that there is some deep meaning in them. If only she could have ended her sentence, if only she could have said all that she evidently wished to say, before death ended her sentence, I think she would have given me the key to all I want to know."

"And what were those words?"

"They were very incoherent—very broken—she said, 'In the ivory box—there is the jewel—it is the clue—never lose it—never let him

know—never let him know—that she—' and that was all."

"Never let him know," the lawyer repeated slowly, "never let who know? What did she mean by that? To whom was she alluding?"

"I have no idea—unless—possibly, she spoke of Sylvia's father. She spoke again of some man—at the very end—when she whispered, 'Do not let him take her to kill her soul and—' and again the sentence ended abruptly. It was quite plain that some man had made havoc of the poor creature's life, and that she was in mortal terror lest he should also do harm to the child. But who, or where he is, I have no more idea than the man in the moon."

"The woman was a lady?" Mr. Duncan's keen eyes scrutinised the young man's face, whilst his shrewd brain speculated whether his client could perchance have fallen in love with a dying woman. The many strange stories that had become known to him in the course of his work, told him that stranger things than this had happened, "or was she—" he paused, "a mere adventuress?"

"She was undoubtedly a lady," Giles answered decidedly, though with no undue warmth, "she was one of the best specimens of a well-born, well-bred Englishwoman, very beautiful, very gentle and refined. I confess her absolutely lonely condition puzzled me."

"But how did she live? She must have had some resources. Did not remittances come to her from anywhere?"

"As far as I could ascertain, no letters of any sort ever reached her. I made enquiries about her from the hotel proprietor, a most worthy soul, genuinely concerned about poor Mrs. Burnett and her little girl. This Madame Richard told me that no letters ever came for Mrs. Burnett, but that her account was regularly paid, and that she believed Mrs. Burnett had some small amount of money in the bank. She also told me that Sylvia's mother had been giving English lessons in one or two Russian families, and that on the day of her accident she had been driving out, as she did twice a week, to the château of a Russian countess some miles from the town."

"You acted on the information this landlady gave you?"

"Certainly. I saw the bank people, who, on hearing particulars, gave me all the help in their power. It amounted to very little. They told me a sum had been paid into them in Mrs. Burnett's name three years before, but by whom it was paid they had no idea. The money had come from England, and was entirely in five pound notes: the letter with it was signed only with the letter B, and no address was given. But the notes were genuine; Mrs. Burnett's

signature was enclosed, the account was to be opened in her name, and a week after the bank received the money, she called in person. She had drawn small sums ever since, the manager told me, adding that the money was almost exhausted. He could not help me in the least as to her identity."

"And the Russian employers, you saw them?"

"I called at the two houses to which Madame Richard directed me. The ladies at both houses were most courteous, extremely distressed about Mrs. Burnett's death, and ready to give me any information they possessed. But they practically knew nothing. Mrs. Burnett had advertised herself locally, as an English teacher, with a knowledge of Russian, and she had been engaged to teach the young people of the household—that was all. Everyone who came across her was struck with her beauty and sweetness, she was greatly liked by all those who knew her, but for practical purposes their knowledge amounted to nothing."

"How came she to know Russian? It is an unusual language for an Englishwoman to know."

"I can't tell you. Her own advertisement stated the fact, and the Russian ladies I saw corroborated it. They said she spoke their language with wonderful fluency for a foreigner, but how or why she had

learnt it, they could not say. By a strange coincidence the owner of the motor-car which killed her was a Russian. I heard him speak to his chauffeur," Giles added thoughtfully.

"You also know the language?" Mr. Duncan looked up sharply from the patterns he was still tracing on his blotting paper.

"I have made a special study of it. Nowadays, whether in India or elsewhere, it is a language that might at any moment be the one thing needful. I have done a certain amount of political work on the frontier, and oh! well, Russian is a handy tongue to know."

"No doubt you will give up the Army now that you have succeeded Sir Philip?"

"Give up the Army—not much," Giles laughed. "I'm only twenty-six, the service means a lot to me—and I don't feel like settling down into a country squire yet awhile. No, I am hoping to be married during the course of the summer, to enjoy as much of my leave as I can at Manderby Court, and then—to go back to India with my wife." The little exultant tone in the vigorous voice brought a smile to the lawyer's face.

"I wish you every happiness. And—will the lady who is going to marry you be ready to accept your ward—if you really persist in undertaking the guardianship of Sylvia Burnett?"

A light shone in Giles' grey eyes.

"I think I can answer 'yes' unreservedly to that question," he answered, "Miss Cardew is out of town for the week-end. I have not yet seen her since my return to England. But I have no doubt about what she will say, no doubt at all," he added proudly, "she will be a mother to my poor little Sylvia—the best and kindest of mothers."

CHAPTER VI.

A MEETING.

"I THINK, perhaps, Sir Giles, you have no idea of the value of this jewel?"

"Not the faintest idea. That is precisely the reason why I have brought it to you to be valued," Tredman answered drily, looking with some amusement into the face of the jeweller, a man whose fame as an expert in precious stones was world wide. Mr. Sharpland, the expert in question, looked back at his client with a smile. He and Sir Giles had had many dealings together; he had known the Tredman family ever since he himself, as a young man, first entered his father's business, and he and Giles had a mutual respect and liking for one another. They stood opposite each other now in the jeweller's private room at the back of the big shop, and Mr. Sharpland held in his hand the ivory box which had first been shown to Giles by Sylvia's young mother.

"You are, of course, aware that emeralds are some of the most valuable gems in the market," the little man continued, fixing shrewd eyes on his customer's face, "and the emeralds in this ornament are some of the finest it has ever been my lot to see. They are magnificent, and I will say to you what I would hesitate to say to anyone else, they are not like stones which I should have imagined to be in the possession of any private individual."

"What do you mean?" Giles looked with bewilderment at the jeweller, as the latter paused.

"I mean that these stones are more the sort of stones one would expect to find in regalia, or, at any rate, belonging to royal personages. Frankly, Sir Giles, when I came to examine it closely, the ornament gave me a shock. It is so very valuable, so very unique."

"What is your impression as to its value?"

"I unhesitatingly place the value at eighty thousand pounds, and I should be inclined to think one hundred thousand pounds was nearer the mark," came the prompt reply, a reply so astounding to Sir Giles that for a moment he only stared speechlessly into the other man's face.

"Are you serious?" he exclaimed at last, "do you really mean to say that your estimate of the thing is as high as that?"

"I really mean it. If you wished to sell the jewel now, I should be prepared to offer you seventy thousand pounds for it—here at once. I can say no more than that."

"But—" Tredman stammered, "it is incomprehensible. It takes my breath away. I found this ornament in the possession of a lady who was living in actual poverty. She was working for her bread—in a sort of hand-to-mouth existence. She died suddenly under very tragic circumstances, leaving me practically in charge of her child and this jewel. And as far as I could understand her last injunctions, they amounted to a request that the jewel should not be parted with. At least—" Giles paused, and drew his brows together, "the poor lady could scarcely speak coherently or collectedly; it was difficult to gather exactly what her wishes were, but she certainly said 'Do not part with it—unless—' but the sentence went unended. I do not know what more the poor soul meant to say."

"I suppose," Mr. Sharpland's long hands fingered the ivory box softly, "I suppose you have no doubt as to the lady's—integrity? The ornament came into her hands in—in—ahem!—in absolutely regular ways?"

"I *know* nothing," Giles' grey eyes met the jeweller's shrewd ones frankly, and without embar-

rassment, "the purest chance (if there is such a thing as chance) mixed me up in the motor accident which cost Mrs. Burnett her life. I was merely walking along the road when it happened. And as the victim was a fellow countrywoman, and the hound of a motorist went off without giving her the slightest help, I did what I could for the lonely lady, and her even more lonely child. That is the affair in a nutshell. I never heard of Mrs. Burnett before, nor can I find any clue now to her belongings, antecedents, or past. But—such knowledge of the world as I possess, tells me that the poor thing was a lady, and a lady of refinement and breeding—in no sense of the word an adventuress. Therefore, I can't believe that this jewel came into her hands in any shady way."

"Perhaps she had a husband whose character would bear less close inspection than her own," Mr. Sharpland hazarded.

"Very possibly. When she was dying, she made allusion to some man of whom it struck me she was afraid. But like all the rest of her speech, the allusions were broken and incoherent. I thought—but it might have been my imagination—that she wanted her little girl shielded from somebody—and she spoke of that jewel as a clue. But to what it is a clue, I have not the ghost of a notion."

"An ornament so conspicuous, and so valuable as this, would certainly be a clue to anyone who had ever been known to possess it," Mr. Sharpland said with a short laugh, "and if there is the slightest fear that the little girl of whom you spoke may be traced through it, I would advise you to keep it well hidden. Unless you think it better to part with it entirely?"

"I can't do that," Giles answered decidedly, "at any rate I can't do it until I find out something more about my small ward and her antecedents. I have undertaken the care of the poor child," he added hurriedly, "and—in view of her mother's urgent admonition not to part with the jewel, I feel bound to keep it, at least for the present—at least until the child is grown up, and can decide matters for herself."

"You are undertaking a serious responsibility, Sir Giles," the elder man said gently, "a very kind one—but a very serious one. The child of unknown parents, with a certain doubtfulness about her antecedents, and with this extraordinarily valuable and unique thing in her possession, is a serious charge. Isn't it, forgive my presumption—isn't it a trifle —quixotic?"

"My solicitor assures me it is more than a trifle quixotic," Giles answered, "and if I had relations, I have no doubt my decision would call down a

storm of remonstrance on my head. But I have no relations ; I am my own master, and —well ! the fact of the matter is, my mind is made up."

" Your best friends will honour you for what you are doing," the jeweller said simply, " and now, Sir Giles, to return to business. I will give you a written valuation of the ornament," as he spoke, he unlocked the ivory box, and drew out the jewel, " and please understand, that if at any time you, or your ward, wish to sell it, I will give you seventy thousand pounds for it. I frankly own that you might get more for it elsewhere. That is what it would be worth to me ; and if this little girl is penniless, as I gather she is, the sale of the jewel will remove that disability."

The exquisite ornament lay on his outstretched palm, and both men looked silently at the flashing gems, the vivid green of the emeralds, the scintillating white loveliness of the brilliants.

" It is a lovely piece of work," Giles exclaimed at last.

" It is unique," the other answered emphatically, " absolutely unique. In all my long experience, I have never come across anything quite like it, and though I have no idea what it costs to ransom kings, I should say, in popular parlance, that it was worth a king's ransom."

"Well, it had certainly better be deposited at once in my bank," Giles laughed; "one shivers to think of the reckless carelessness of that poor lady who apparently kept it in her travelling trunk! I'm very much obliged to you for your good advice about the child. But I couldn't take that, you know."

"And I am glad you couldn't," the jeweller smiled; "in this degenerate age, it is refreshing to find that there are still some Don Quixotes left amongst us."

"You think I am tilting at windmills?"

"Not at all. I am sure you are doing a fine thing, and equally sure you will be rewarded for doing it. The world would be a better place if there were a few more people in it ready to be so disinterested."

The kindly jeweller's praise pleased Giles, for, truth to tell, the letter he had received that morning from his fiancée, had cooled some of the warm glow in his heart. He had felt so sure of Grace's understanding and approval; so certain that she would endorse his action and enter into his motives and feelings, that her somewhat chilly letter came with the effect of a cold douche. She wrote from the country house where she and her mother were spending the week-end, and beyond some expressions of regret at being out of town for Giles'

arrival, her letter was mainly filled with descriptions of her fellow guests, and the delightful time she was enjoying. Only in a few words at the end, did she make any reference to the guardianship Giles had undertaken, and those words, as the young man instinctively felt, showed a lack of warmth and interest.

"When we meet we will talk about your scheme of taking charge of this little girl, Sylvia Burnett. It will want a great deal of consideration. It seems a big undertaking."

That was all. And, whilst Giles's heart contracted a little over the chilly sentences, he also smiled a trifle grimly.

"The day for talking over and consideration is past," he reflected, "Grace will understand it all when I can explain it to her. It is only that she doesn't quite understand yet."

But when, on that same afternoon, after his visit to the jeweller, he was alone with Grace in the Cromwell Road drawing-room, he found that to make her understand his point of view, was not the easy task he had imagined. Grace was as charming, as fascinating, as irresistible as ever in his eyes, and, whilst they talked of themselves, and their own future, she was everything that the heart of lover could desire. Her eyes, as they met his, seemed to him to shine with tenderness; her smile set his heart

leaping; the touch of her lips had the same power as of old to thrill his pulses. But directly he began to speak of Sylvia, Grace's face and manner subtly changed. It was not that she spoke hardly or irritably; but almost imperceptibly — she hardened.

"Oh! Giles," she said pleadingly, her hands—and they were very pretty hands—turning themselves in his, "don't let us spoil our first hour together by talking about anything but ourselves. It is so heavenly to see you again; I don't want to hear about little girls, or—or any tiresome business worries yet."

"Poor little Sylvia is hardly a business worry," Giles answered, his hand still holding hers in a close clasp, his eyes greedily drinking in the loveliness of her face, the delicacy of her colouring, the brightness of her hair, "she is a very human little soul, and I am sure you will love her, darling. I want to know when I can bring her to see you."

Only by a genuine effort at self-control, did Grace keep from her face the distaste she inwardly experienced; only by reminding herself that she would be a fool to upset Giles at this moment, did she contrive to banish from her voice any note of petulance.

"I don't think children really like me," she said, smiling, and quite unaware of the grave admission

she was making, a gravity equally unperceived by Tredman, who was too deeply in love to be able to see flaws in his idol; "but of course you shall bring her here, Giles. Where is she now?"

"In my hotel. I have found—or rather my solicitor has found for me, a nurse to take care of her temporarily, but I thought, if you agreed, that I would try to get a lady to take charge of her until——"

"If I agreed?" Grace broke in quickly, again only just able to prevent a note of sharpness from stealing into her voice; "but, my dear Giles, what have I to do with it? You surely—don't really mean to make yourself responsible for the child of a total stranger? As we have begun the subject, perhaps we had better speak of it, though—I should have liked our first hour together to have been given entirely to ourselves."

The tender reproach of her accents touched Giles' heart. He could never bear to hurt or vex a living soul, much less the woman he loved, and drawing her towards him, he said gently—

"Dear, we won't talk of anything but ourselves to-day. The talk about Sylvia can easily be postponed, and for the present, at least, she is well cared for. When I have found a lady to

look after her, I shall send them both to Manderby Court."

"Oh!" Grace exclaimed involuntarily, her face flushing, "are you going to have her *there?*"

"Why, yes, of course, my darling," Giles' voice expressed the surprise he felt, "I am making myself her legal guardian: I shall be entirely responsible for her, and when you come to take care of me and my house," a great tenderness crept into his tones, "I know the poor little waif will have a loving mother."

"Oh! will she?" Grace reflected viciously, "I know she will have nothing of the sort. The idea, the very idea, of starting our married life handicapped by the care of a child of ten. No thank you, Giles." But the angry thought was not reflected outwardly on her lovely face. Grace had been trained in a school which teaches command of the features, and her histrionic gifts were of no mean order. Her eyes looked into Giles' with a smile of surpassing sweetness, her hand returned the pressure of his.

"We will talk it all out, you dear knight errant," she said playfully. "You oughtn't to have belonged to the nineteenth century, Giles, you ought to have been born in the days when people rode about rescuing fair damsels and redressing wrongs. Meanwhile, are you coming to the Rathbones to-night?

Mrs. Rathbone told me she had sent you an invitation.'"

"Certainly I am going, if you go," he looked at her fondly, "I don't intend to lose a single opportunity of being with you, after all this long time of separation. Next week I must go to Manderby, old Stubbs, my land-agent, writes almost daily about a thousand things that have to be done. But this week will be yours — uninterruptedly yours."

"Uninterruptedly," she repeated softly, "and we will put off all discussion about—everything like business. We will just enjoy ourselves for this week, Giles—you and I."

"Just enjoy ourselves," he repeated softly, carried away by the magic of her voice and eyes, "that won't be difficult with you, sweetheart, and I——"

Whilst he was speaking the door opened, and the trim parlour-maid announced in her aggressively English accent—

"Mr. Müller."

Giles and Grace sprang apart, and Grace was on her feet in a moment, her hand outstretched, a welcoming smile on her face.

"How nice of you to come in to-day, Mr. Müller," she said, "may I introduce you to my fiancé, Sir Giles Tredman? I——"

Her sentence was not finished, for whilst she was still speaking, Giles stepped forward, a dark colour mounting to his very forehead, a blaze of indignation in his eyes.

"I think—this is not the first time we have seen each other," he said, his voice sounding strangely thick and hoarse, "you and I—met—barely a fortnight ago—on the road that goes from Savoy to Italy. Your victim—died!" The broken phrases, the harsh, broken voice, the anger that blazed in his eyes, gave Grace an odd sensation that he was a stranger, not the man she knew at all, and the hand she put out to touch him and check his excitement, dropped to her side again. She felt suddenly powerless, helpless in face of forces she could not understand, and as Giles came forward, she shrank back towards the sofa, looking with frightened eyes from one man to the other. All the excitement was on Tredman's side; the foreigner stood there imperturbably, a shadow of surprise on his face, in his manner, a hint of polite bewilderment—nothing more. And as Giles paused, he bent his head courteously, saying, in his fluent English, which had so slight a trace of foreign accent:—

"I think you must have mistaken me for someone else, Sir Giles. I have never been to Aix les Bains in my life. I—" a pair of keen blue eyes scrutinised Giles' agitated countenance, "I have certainly never

had the pleasure of seeing you before, and—" his brows drew together in a puzzled frown, "forgive me, but I do not understand your allusion to—my victim. What you have said is, as you would express it, 'Greek' to me."

Giles stared at the strongly set, handsome features, at the blue eyes whose penetrating keenness was so startling, at the dark hair just turning grey; stared at the stranger's tall form, which towered above his own, though he was by no means a short man; and staring, felt that either he, or his companion, must be taking leave of his senses. In a flash of recollection he was back again upon the long white road, that leads across the meadow land from Aix towards the mountains. At his feet he saw the wrecked pony carriage, the dying animal, the inanimate form of the woman amidst the wreckage; and the great black motor-car that had wrought all the havoc. And, beside it, he could see the towering form of a man, with strong and handsome face, dark hair touched here and there with grey, and blue eyes, keen blue eyes, whose glance seemed to penetrate to his actual soul. The man in the Cardews' drawing-room was the living counterpart of that man whose lineaments were so clearly painted for him by memory. And yet—the man standing before him in the flesh, repudiated all knowledge of Aix or of the accident, and looking full in

his questioner's face, denied the accusation brought against him. Giles was staggered, more staggered, perhaps, than he had ever been in his life; and sheer amazement held him dumb.

"You have lately seen someone at Aix who resembled me?" Mr. Müller spoke suavely, with a certain persuasive gentleness that gave Tredman a curious longing to strike the handsome face.

"I could have sworn I had seen *you*," he answered shortly; "have you by any chance a twin brother who is as like you as two peas?"—a touch of scorn rang in his voice, but the other man maintained his imperturbability—"and does your brother talk Russian fluently, and drive a powerful black motor? If so, he killed a woman outside Aix a fortnight ago. He injured her fatally, and then—drove away," the scorn in Giles' voice was biting; "he is your living image, and if I may venture to offer advice, I should suggest that you would do well not to visit Aix and its neighbourhood. You are so exceedingly like the man wanted by the French police, that you might be arrested by mistake." The other man seemed unconscious of the studied insolence of Giles' tones. He merely put out his hands with a deprecating gesture, and smiled—a smile that all at once lent an extraordinary charm to his somewhat sternly-cut features.

"I am not surprised that you are angry at what, judging by your words, must have been a most cowardly and scoundrelly action. But let me most solemnly assure you that I have no brothers, that I do not speak a word of Russian, and that I have never been to Aix in my life."

CHAPTER VII.

AN ADVERTISEMENT.

"Oh! Marion, don't you think I might answer this advertisement? It sounds so exactly what I have been wanting, and—I ought to find some work."

"It isn't so much a question of what you ought to do, as of what Robert will let you do," the second speaker lifted faded eyes from a stocking she was knitting, and her hands trembled a little; "you know I am willing enough to support you in your wish to go away and earn something, but—my dear Helen, what is the use of my supporting your wishes, if Robert will not hear of them?"

"Robert has no right to tyrannise over us! A brother cannot expect to regulate his sister's lives, and surely we are old enough to manage our own affairs?"

"We are old enough, yes, but have we ever learnt

to be independent enough to strike out a line for ourselves?" The woman with the knitting looked wistfully across at her sister, and that wistfulness in her eyes and voice was as pathetic as her words, "We have always been in subjection, you and I, first to mother, then to Robert, always in subjection—since——"

"Since one member of the family had the courage to rebel," the sister called Helen exclaimed impetuously, "since——"

"Hush! Oh! Helen, hush," the other woman glanced round the small meagre room with nervous looks, "do be quiet, do be careful. Let me see the advertisement — let me think whether it would be of any use to consult Robert about it?"

"Consult Robert? It is no use to do that," a sort of despair rang in the sister's voice, "he would only refuse at once to allow me to do what I want. Robert is—is—so dictatorial, and yet, he has no real right to dictate to us. Our lives are our own."

"Oh! are they?" The sister called Marion spoke grimly, her smile was as grim as her voice, "Your life and mine have never belonged to us, Helen; they are never likely to belong to us. *We* haven't the spirit poor Tiny had—she——"

"Oh! Marion, you said 'hush' to me just now when I spoke of her. But you see, you yourself can't help mentioning her name when you begin to think of us—and our—own dependence. Sometimes I think"—the speaker's tone took on an accent of acute dejection—"sometimes I think—we have been just fools all our lives, Marion—you and I—just fools."

The room in which the two sisters sat, was one of those rooms whose depressing furniture, and the still more depressing arrangement thereof, gives one an instant certainty that the inmates are not adepts in the art of making a house home-like. The furniture in the Miss Stansdales' tiny drawing-room was early Victorian as to period, and showed all the most glaring faults of that period. There was also a great deal too much of it for the size of the apartment, and it had quite obviously been transported thither from a room of much more imposing dimensions. The carpet was almost threadbare, and age had mercifully faded the colours, which in its early youth had evidently been of the crudest. Time had performed the same kindly office for the chintz of the curtains and sofa, its original hues having been those staring and brilliant ones, in which our early Victorian forbears seemed to take so great a delight.

The vases and ornaments with which the mantel-

piece was crowded, all belonged to the same inartistic epoch, and, indeed, the two occupants of the room were the only portions of it who did not appear to be stamped with the crudity and bad taste of that past age. In neither Miss Marion Stansdale, nor in her sister Helen, was there the slightest sign of anything glaring or crude; each in her own person, and in her own way, was a perfect presentment of the quiet, old-fashioned type of gentlewoman, and neither their shabby dresses nor their lined faces could hide this self-evident fact.

Marion was the elder — but Helen had always possessed the stronger character, and although the greater experience of sixty-two years, made Marion think that she still had the right to dictate and advise, as in their earlier life, Helen had more than once been known to declare, that she saw no reason for being under her sister's yoke, now that she herself could write down her age as sixty.

There was a strong family likeness between the two who sat facing one another, knitting in hand, on either side of the open window, an odd family likeness, that in Miss Helen emphasised all the strong points of the Stansdales, whilst in Miss Marion those same points were weakened. Both sisters had blue eyes, soft grey blue, like an English sky on a wintry day, and both had a way of beaming

kindly, if a little deprecatingly, on all who crossed their paths. But whilst Marion's eyes seldom met yours quite fully, Helen looked you in the face, not squarely, but with a certain appeal, which, if you had any heart at all, went straight to it. Their mouths were cut on the same lines, but whilst Marion's drooped at the corners, and her lips had a little way of falling apart, Helen's showed no sign of a droop, and her lips set themselves in a more or less firm line.

Both sisters innocently prided themselves on their undoubtedly good complexions, and, indeed, many a younger woman might have envied them the delicate colouring, that gave them the look of some dainty morsels of Dresden china; and their hair was the softest, purest white.

Locally they were wont to be styled "those dear old Miss Stansdales," and Miss Helen could seldom go down the back streets of the suburb, without being accompanied by a string of small children, who clung to her skirts, and chattered to her volubly, at the full pitch of their shrill high voices.

Ever since their advent to Stokeley, the sisters had shared a district in one of the suburb's slums, feeling it to be incumbent on them to carry on the work amongst the poor, which had been their happiness in the old village home:

and though they did not consider that the shrewd cockney folks compared well with the country poor, they had, in course of years, grown fond of their new friends' independence, and what Miss Marion called "terrible socialism," notwithstanding. They had only been part of the whole dreadful nightmare which had brought about their uprooting from their peaceful country home, and the new planting in this tiny suburban villa with its small rooms, its overlooked garden, its outlook across a road lined with villas all built on precisely the same pattern.

And although many years had gone by since that dreadful nightmare and its attendant uprooting took place, neither Miss Stansdale had ever been able to feel really happy or at home in Stokeley. Obviously, Robert, the brother who gave them a home, must live near London, because he was obliged to go to the City every day, obviously, therefore, they must be content to make the best of the suburb and all it entailed. But making the best of it had been no easy task, and in spite of all their valiant efforts, the two sisters had never been able really to grow accustomed to the life of the suburb.

"Just fools," Helen repeated for the third time, after a long silence, and her hands dropped

into her lap, whilst the sock she knitted slid to the floor, and her blue eyes fixed themselves on their own patch of front garden, and on the pink hawthorn in the garden of the opposite neighbour.

"Helen, my dear," the elder said, in a small shocked voice, for the teaching of her youth told her that the word used so emphatically by Helen, was one that should never fall from a lady's lips, "we—perhaps we may have been—mistaken, I don't know, it is so hard for women to fight, so hard to resist those who are stronger than themselves, but I think one ought not to call even one's self—a—a——"

"A—fool?" the other sister laughed a trifle bitterly, "no—it isn't a very lady-like expression, and oh! dear, how poor Miss Simmonds would have scolded me for saying such a dreadful thing," and before the eyes of the sixty-year old lady, flitted a remembrance of the governess who had regulated her manners in her far-off youth, "yes—Marion, I know it is unladylike," she went on, speaking more firmly, and sitting more upright in her chair, "but all the same—it is true. I believe we have been foolish—and worse than foolish—to give in as we have always done, to somebody else. I know all about what you say, that we were weak, and they more strong—first, mother was stronger than we, and

now Robert, but because we are weak as well, it doesn't make us less foolish. And now," the little elderly lady suddenly seemed to brace herself into determination, "now—I am going to try and be strong."

"Oh! Helen, what do you mean?" Marion faltered, her eyes looking at her sister with a frightened stare, "you can't fight Robert, he will have his way, he—has—always had his way."

"Then it is time he began to have something else," Helen answered, with an outward assumption of courage she was far from feeling inwardly. "I have been thinking a great deal lately, and I am sure, some of the young people are right, Marion, some of those who say we each have an individual life to live, and that we ought to be allowed to live it. I—" her voice wavered,—"I—have as much right to live my individual life as Robert has to live his, or as—as—Tiny—" Marion started, and interrupted the other's sentence, almost brusquely.

"Helen—you must not talk of—of—her. We ought not to break Robert's rule about that; and it was mother's rule too—oh! hush—do hush!—about what we ought to try and forget."

"*Forget?*" There was an odd ring of scorn

in Helen's voice, "as if we could forget our dear——"

"Helen, *don't!*" Marion's tones were agonised. "What has made you so strange to-day, so discontented? Why are you talking like this about individuality, and all sorts of things you have never talked about before?"

"Because," Miss Helen pushed back her chair, and rising, leant against the window frame, "when I saw that advertisement to-day, it seemed to come like a message from heaven. It jumped at me off the page of the paper. I was not looking for it, Marion, it just *came* like a call, and I felt all at once that I couldn't go on living here like this, on Robert's bounty, that I must go and earn my own living—as I have so often wished and asked to do," she added, under her breath. Marion looked at her half affrightedly. She felt much as she might have done if a tame dove had suddenly flown into her face, and the sight of Helen's strangely bright eyes, and flushed cheeks and shaking hands, filled the elder sister with a vague alarm.

"I know you have wanted before to go away and work," she said, tremulously, "but — mother would never hear of it, and Robert has always said——"

"I don't mind what Robert has always said," Helen broke in, sheer exasperation lending an

unaccustomed sternness to her gentle voice, "Robert is only my brother. I am not his slave. He has an exaggerated notion of what is due to the family name and honour. I think it is more honourable for a woman to earn her own living honestly, than to be entirely dependent on a brother who can hardly make two ends meet as it is, and who grudges every penny he gives to his sisters. It is just a family fetish that no lady must work. I am tired of Robert and his tyranny," the gentle voice with its new note of anger trembled violently, "and I am not going to be afraid of him any more. If he will not give his consent to my answering this advertisement, well, then, I shall go without his consent—that's all." And, exhausted by her passionate plea for liberty, the little lady sank into her chair, and picked up her knitting again with fingers that still shook visibly. Marion opened her mouth twice before she could get out the words that were on her lips, but when she spoke at last, she did not say in the least what she had intended to say. She had meant to remonstrate faintly with Helen, to try and soothe her back into a placid acceptance and endurance of things as they were. But something new in her sister's attitude, some fresh determination which she saw in Helen's firmly closed lips, made her say instead—

"Show me the advertisement again, Helen. I

did not really take it all in when I read it just now."

"I'll read it to you," a note of exultation born of her new courage rang in the younger sister's voice. "I cut it out after breakfast, and this is what it says." Drawing a slip of paper from her pocket, and adjusting her pince-nez, Helen slowly read the advertisement taken from that day's *Morning Post.*

"'Wanted, a gentlewoman of middle age, to take sole charge of a little motherless girl of ten. Only a lady of good birth and education, and of unimpeachable references need apply. Address: G.T., *Morning Post* Office.'

"I could get the references," Helen said thoughtfully, "the vicar would vouch for my respectability, and Dr. Glover too. And our birth and education are all that could be wished, aren't they?" she said with a wistful smile. "And—oh! Marion, I am so fond of children. I should like to have charge of this motherless girl. I am going to answer the advertisement directly," she added after a pause.

"Oh! Helen," Marion put out her hands imploringly, "but before you have spoken to Robert?"

"Yes—before I have spoken to Robert. I am not going to say a word about it to Robert, until it

is all settled. If I don't get the post—well, then, I shall not tell him I applied at all. There is no law compelling people to tell their brothers all they do. But, if I do get the post; I shall just tell Robert I am proposing to undertake this work, and Robert will have to make the best he can of a bad job."

CHAPTER VIII.

SYLVIA'S CHOICE.

GILES TREDMAN, seated at the writing table in his hotel sitting-room, looked with a perturbed face through letter after letter of a huge pile beside him.

"It's a big job to answer all these, but I haven't the heart to leave them unanswered," he reflected, "and some of the poor souls send stamped envelopes, some of the most obviously unfit applicants for the post too." He smiled sadly, whilst his eyes still travelled rapidly over letter after letter, each of which was laid aside when he had perused it, "none of them in the least possible," he exclaimed aloud, "and yet the poor ladies seem to be in such pitiable straits, one wishes one could engage them all. Of the four I have picked out, my own inclinations point to—wait a moment—I have a very good mind to let the child herself help in the choice. Why not? She has a shrewd enough little brain behind those

great sad eyes of hers, and a child often sees further than do the rest of us. Sylvia," he called, raising his voice, "Sylvia, come in here a minute, I want you to do something for me." She answered his summons at once, a small, slim creature, looking younger than her years, because of her slimness, seeming to the man who watched her, pathetically childlike in her deep black frock, which enhanced the whiteness of her face, and the sadness of her eyes.

"Come here, dear," the young man said, putting out his hand to her, "you know I have been trying to find a nice lady to come and take care of you, and be with you always."

"Yes, I know. But I'd much rather you took care of me," she answered simply, her eyes looking full into his grey eyes, "it doesn't feel so lonely when you're there,—and I—don't want mother quite so dreadfully then," her lips quivered, but she showed no other demonstration of feeling, and Giles drew her within the circle of his arm and laid a gentle hand upon the dusky softness of her hair.

"Poor little maid," he said kindly, "you shall be with me as much as ever I can manage, but you know, Sylvia, I have to be away a good deal; and by and by I shall be going back to India, and I'm going to be married before very long, and so I must

find somebody to take care of my little girl for the present, until——"

"Until, what?" she questioned, putting back her head that she might look up into his face. "Some day shall I be able to stay with you altogether, all the time?"

"Some day, I hope," he hesitated. "Some day, when my wife and I are settled down in our own house at Manderby, I hope she and I will take care of you. But——"

"But I don't think she much likes little girls," Sylvia put in thoughtfully, her small fingers moving along the line of blue veins on Sir Giles' bronzed hand, "some people don't like little girls, you see, and—Miss Cardew doesn't."

Giles looked at the child with troubled eyes. He had tried to assure himself that his own uncomfortable convictions as to Grace's feelings had been only due to his imagination, and Sylvia's corroboration of those convictions struck unpleasantly on his ears. He had taken the child to the Cardews' house one afternoon, and both Mrs. Cardew and her daughter had plied Sylvia with tea and cakes, and had talked pleasantly enough to the little girl, "down to her level" as they would perhaps have said, if they had translated their thoughts into speech. But Giles, without being able to put his feelings into words, had dimly felt that something was wanting in their

treatment of his ward, and he knew that he had expected more from Grace, hoped for more. And now Sylvia was echoing the thoughts which he had not hitherto allowed to reach the surface of his mind. "I don't think she much likes little girls." He again thrust the thought from him. He told himself that the motherly feeling he was sure Grace possessed, would find its way to the surface when she had the child actually in her own charge, and he patted Sylvia's shoulder encouragingly, as he said—

"Oh, but I think Miss Cardew and you will be very great friends when you live together. You see she has never had much to do with little girls, she is an only child herself, so she doesn't really know anything about other children. But some day, when you and she and I live together—she will be like a mother to you, dear."

"I don't think she'll ever be like a mother," Sylvia answered quietly, with a sudden gasp in her breath, "mothers are—different. But if you love her very much, I shall try to love her too," she added, looking into his face with a child's adoring eyes, "I'm always going to love what you love."

"Are you, little girl?" Giles touched her soft hair again with caressing touch, and smiled down at her, "you are a very loving little soul, aren't you, Sylvia?"

"When I love anything very much, it hurts—just here," the child replied, putting two small hands on her breast, her eyes dilating and deepening, "it sometimes hurts dreadfully."

"What a sensitive little soul it is!" Giles murmured, his hand still stroking the dark hair, his eyes watching the small face over which a wave of emotion seemed to sweep; "well, now, Sylvia, I want to find someone to live with you, and take care of you, someone whom you will love: and this morning four ladies are coming to see me, and I think you had better just stop in here with your books, and then, you will tell me afterwards which of the ladies you like best. If you and I like the same one, we will see if we can't get her to come and be with you always." The child assented with a smile. She was a very docile little thing, but as Giles realised, her docility was due rather to strength than to lack of character, for he had known Sylvia long enough now to understand what a strong nature lay behind those great wistful eyes, that firm set mouth. He had seen her wonderful power of self-control, a quite extraordinary power in one so young, and in a dim way he recognised in her an uncommon personality, a personality that might in some future day make its mark in the world. Obedient now to his suggestion, she stole softly into the room next door (where the nurse he had temporarily found

for her, sat alternately sewing and reading a penny novelette), fetched the book in which she was at present engrossed, and curled herself up in a big armchair beside the window, a point of vantage from which she could, when she liked, glance across at Giles' face bent over his writing.

"And, of course, I like to look at Monsieur," she meditated quaintly to herself, using for her guardian the name by which she had first called him, "he looks so kind I'm never tired of just seeing him." Giles' pen scratched on busily for half an hour, and Sylvia occupied herself over her book, and with long periods of staring with fascinated eyes at her guardian, who to her youthful fancy represented first one and then another hero of romance and fairy tale: and the clock on the mantelpiece had chimed eleven, before the silence in the room was broken by a knock at the door.

"A lady to see you, sir," the page-boy announced, and during the following hour the embarrassed young man found himself confronted by four ladies in turn, each one most desirous of obtaining the extremely pleasant post at his disposal. It was the first time in his life that it had ever fallen to Tredman's lot to interview ladies in search of employment, and he intensely disliked the whole performance, only wishing, from the bottom of his heart, that he could engage all the applicants, and satisfy the hungry

yearning which his observant eyes marked upon each of their faces. To each he explained in simple, concise language what he required: a lady to take sole charge of his ward, to live with her at his country house, Manderby Court, to educate her, with the help of whatever masters might be thought necessary, to look after her physical, mental and moral welfare, in fact, to undertake the full responsibility of her training. The salary he offered sounded to the ears of the applicants a princely one; it was small wonder that the two weary-looking widows, and the rather haggard spinster of forty, should each look wistfully into Giles's bronzed face, and express faltering hopes that perhaps they might be suitable for the situation. Courteous to all women, he was perhaps even a shade more courteous to these ladies to whom life had dealt so hardly, and something in his kindly words, his spontaneous and kindly smile, put new heart into their tired souls, even though in dismissing them, he only said—

"I will write to you to-night. Before I come to a decision I am obliged to see all the other ladies with whom I have made appointments, but I will write directly I am able to decide."

From the depths of the armchair little Sylvia's eyes had watched the three ladies come and go, had studied their faces, their voices, their manners, with the keen scrutiny of a naturally observant child, but

just as Tredman was turning towards her to ask which of the three had most pleased her, a knock once more sounded on the door, and there entered a small lady over whose face there ran a sudden flush as Giles rose to greet her. He saw at once that she was more shabbily dressed than any of the other three applicants, but her clothing was scrupulously neat, and the refinement of her voice pleased his fastidious ear. The daintiness of her complexion, the soft blue of her eyes, and the snowy whiteness of her hair that showed under her black bonnet, made him feel as if he were speaking to someone belonging to another epoch, and something in the gentle dignity of her bearing gave the same impression. It was obvious that she was totally unaccustomed to being interviewed about situations, for she flushed more vividly as Sir Giles asked her one or two questions, and a distressed look crept into her eyes.

"I don't think I ought to mislead you about myself," she said, her nervousness of manner increasing as she spoke, "I should like to be quite honest with you. I have never done any work like this before. Perhaps I ought to say I have never done any work at all, and I—am afraid I have no experience," her eyes left Giles' face, and turned to the small figure in the armchair, and, as she and Sylvia looked at one another, a smile crossed her face,

"only—I am very fond of children, very—very fond, and I saw your advertisement, and I wanted some work, and so—I answered it. But I don't want you to think I am experienced."

"It is very good of you," Giles was beginning, when, apparently heedless of his words, the little lady went on hurriedly, "I am afraid I am not clever enough to educate anybody. I have always liked reading, and I have read a great deal. But I have no certificates, I know nothing of modern methods of teaching. I—oh! I think you must be sure now that I have come here on false pretences," she ended, with a little break in her voice.

"Not at all," Giles began courteously, "I——" but again his sentence was interrupted, this time not by the little lady, but by Sylvia, who had slipped from her armchair, and was standing by her guardian's side, one small hand clutching tightly at his arm, her eyes looking eagerly into his face.

"Please, let her come!" the child exclaimed breathlessly, "she's different from all the others—oh! please, let her come—she has such dear, mother eyes."

* * * * *

"Well, Helen, all I can say is, I wash my hands of you if you persist in this nonsensical, outrageous

scheme. I've always said, and I'll always stick to it, it is not fitting that a lady of your birth and position should work for her living. Ladies of the Stansdale family never have stooped to anything of the kind, and I should have thought you would have had too much respect for your family, to wish to bring discredit on its name."

Robert Stansdale, drawn up to his full height, stood before the empty grate in the drawing-room of their suburban villa, looking at his sister Helen with angry and astonished eyes. He had listened with very ill-concealed impatience to her explanations of her reason for wishing to take the step he considered so outrageous, and now he stood staring at her, with a confused sensation that his world, the little world in which he had so long strutted as supreme cock of the walk, was all at once being turned inside out and upside down. Robert Stansdale greatly disliked any disturbance in the small world he had ruled so long, and ruled as he felt, so wisely and well. Since their mother's death, some years earlier, he had been sole arbiter of the fates and lives of his sisters, and he prided himself upon having ordered their lives for them in the most suitable way that could be conceived. Helen's present attitude, the extraordinary line of conduct she was suddenly adopting, was incomprehensible to him; not only did he not understand it, he refused

entirely to try to do so. He stood there by the fireplace, an upright, stubborn figure, his grey side whiskers seeming positively to bristle with wrath, his small eyes gleaming angrily, as he watched Helen's nervous, yet determined face.

"Why can't you make her see reason?" he questioned suddenly and sharply, turning to look at his other sister, who crouched back in her chair with frightened face. "I don't see where she's got this infernally silly idea from, but if she has got it, can't you shake it out of her?"

"I—I've tried, Robert," Miss Marion faltered, her blue eyes looking deprecatingly into her brother's angry grey eyes, "but dear Helen will not listen to me, she thinks——"

"She thinks she knows best," Robert interrupted with a sneer, "I suppose she's heard a lot of rubbish about independence, and all the rest of it, from the silly women you meet here and cackle with over your tea. It ought to be beneath your dignity as a Stansdale to know these people at all, much less to listen to their cacklings."

"The people we know here are very nice in every way, Robert," Helen put in, with a firmness which, as her brother faintly realised, was new to her, "and I have never discussed with any of them, the question of a woman's independence. But, for a long time, for a *very* long time," her accents increased in

firmness, "I have chafed against my own position, I have disliked being a burden upon you, and now that, as you told us a few weeks ago, your income is less, I have made up my mind to work."

Robert gave a laugh that was something between a snort and a sneer.

"To *work?* At your age? A pretty mess you're likely to make of it. An old lady of sixty can't very well begin working, with any chance of success, and I tell you, Helen, I don't intend you to do it."

"But," his sister's blue eyes met his unflinchingly, though she shrank a little at his words, "I intend to do what I wish, Robert, whether you oppose me or not. This is not a new idea of mine. I have wished to do it for years, and hitherto I have submitted to your wishes, against my own better judgment. Now, I am going to follow that judgment. The time has come when I must do as I think best, and live my own individual life."

Some strange, and hitherto undeveloped courage, stirred Helen into her brave little speech, but, having made it, she subsided once more and became her normal frightened self, collapsing into the nearest chair with a nervous glance at her brother's enraged and wrathful countenance.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "your individual

life. My good girl, where in all this world have you picked up expressions of that sort?" and Robert laughed scornfully; "you don't mean to tell me that you are beginning to talk this modern jargon, you—an old woman of sixty? At your time of life you ought to have more sense, and the sooner you make up your mind that I do not intend to countenance your preposterous scheme, the better it will be for you, and for all of us."

His hectoring tone put renewed courage into Helen, and with a sudden flash of resentment in her eyes, she rose to her feet again, and faced her brother with a curious dignity quite foreign to her.

"Robert, I have made up my mind," she said slowly, "and you will not browbeat me into altering it now. Your scolding me will make no difference to my plans, They are settled. I have arranged to go to Sir Giles Tredman, to take care of his ward; and to-morrow I shall join them at the Metropole Hotel."

"Upon my life," Robert blustered, but Helen put up a hand which, though it trembled a little, had nevertheless an oddly quieting effect upon the angry man.

"Everything is quite settled," she went on, her voice growing firmer and more placid with every syllable, "I did not tell you anything about it

until all the arrangements were irrevocably made, but I am sure I shall be very happy in the work I have chosen; and I thought it would be wiser to begin it at once; especially as you will not make life here very agreeable for me, now that I am taking a step of which you disapprove."

"Agreeable to you? No, by Jove! I should think not," came the emphatic reply; "you are running counter to everything I most care for, and if you persist in it, I have no wish to make anything agreeable for you any more. Clearly understand, Helen, that if you go now, you go for good and all."

"Oh! Robert," came a tremulous remonstrance from Marion.

"Hold your tongue!" her brother exclaimed sharply, "if Helen chooses to make herself an uncomfortable bed, she must lie on it; and if it doesn't suit her, she can't come whining back here. No! if she is so determined to work, let her work. You and I will jog on alone, or rather—not alone," he added, "for the probability is that I shall use Helen's vacant room, to put up a young lady whom I have been asked to befriend."

"A young lady?" Marion cried breathlessly, "oh! Robert, how can we, how shall we——"

"Do stop 'oh! Robert, we—we!'" the irascible gentleman exclaimed, "we can and we shall, do

what I choose here. I mean to be master in my own house, let me tell you that, Marion." Robert Stansdale, during his many years of fighting the world in City commercial circles, had lost much of the refinement, and many of the outward signs of birth and breeding, which, through all their adversities, had never left his sisters. Contact with many sorts of men had developed in him a species of brusque roughness which he had fostered and encouraged, and he punctuated his sentence now with a short laugh, that seemed to hold the concentrated essence of a bullying nature.

"Yes, Robert, I know," Marion gasped out, "but, when you said a young lady, I—wondered——"

"You can stop wondering then," he interrupted brutally, "when I was asked to-day if I knew of an English family in this suburb, who would take charge of a young German lady, I said I would make enquiries, and try to find out the right family. Now that I find Helen has made up her mind to take this besotted and ridiculous step, I intend to offer a home to the young lady here, in my house. The money her uncle means to pay for her, will be a great convenience, a *very* great convenience, and you must just make yourself agreeable to her, Marion; and do all you can to give her a pleasant home. I shall write to her uncle to-night."

"But—but—Robert," Marion rose, and came closer to the truculent little man, "surely you will tell us who the young lady is, and what I shall be required to do. I feel, I mean this has come so suddenly, it is such a surprise, I can't quite understand it."

"You'd better collect all your wits together and try to make it out then" was the cutting retort, "the young lady's name is Müller, Miss Rosa Müller. I have met her uncle, he is in the Diplomatic service, but he is often in the City. He wishes his niece to be with refined English people to learn the language, and to see something of English life. He fancies this suburb, and, being a friend of mine,"—here Stansdale preened himself after the fashion of a proud and important peacock, "he asked my advice. I shall write at once to put Helen's room at his niece's disposal."

Bewilderment, dismay, surprise, chased themselves one after another over poor Marion's face, whilst Helen sat speechlessly in her chair, looking from her brother to her sister and back again, in a kind of puzzled stupor.

"Of course, if we must have this young lady," Marion said tremulously, "I will do my best to make her happy; but, if her uncle is in the Diplomatic service, I can't understand why he wants her to live in a suburb like Stockley. Life here hardly

seems to be the kind of life for a girl in that position. I should have thought London, and London society, would——"

"It doesn't matter the value of a brass farthing what you think," Robert answered, with another of his short laughs, "Mr. Müller wishes his niece to come here, and there's an end of it. But I tell you what, Marion, things will have to be nicely done for her. Müller is an important person, there can be no mistake about that; and this girl will have been accustomed to the best, and with what she is going to pay us, she can have the best here, and she *must* have it. Müller's an aristocrat to his finger tips, and there is no doubt Miss Rosa will be one too."

"But, Robert, do you think Dr. Berners will say it is too much for Marion to have the extra worry of a girl in the house, to——" Mr. Stansdale broke roughly in upon Helen's trembling intervention.

"Dr. Berners' opinion will not be asked. There is no necessity for it. Miss Müller is more likely to be a help than a worry to Marion; Dr. Berners is a very good young fellow, and a gentleman, too, which is more than can be said of a good many of his profession. But I have no idea of letting him interfere with my household arrangements. You women are far too fond of consulting that young man, and pinning all your faith in him. Now there's an end

of the argument." Robert put up his hand, as he saw Helen open her mouth to speak again, "I shall settle with Müller that his niece can come to us as soon as Helen goes, and what Berners thinks or doesn't think are matters of complete indifference. Understand that!"

CHAPTER IX.

HUGH BERNERS.

HUGH BERNERS, the rising young doctor, who was making himself a name and reputation in the large suburb of Stockley, ran down the steps of Mrs. Cardew's house in Cromwell Road, with a pleased smile upon his face. He had enjoyed his afternoon; the At Home had turned out far pleasanter and more amusing than he had expected, and he congratulated himself upon having made a special effort, and given up this afternoon to avail himself of Mrs. Cardew's invitation. He had made the Cardews' acquaintance during a week-end, which he had spent at the country house of mutual friends, and his host, Mr. Dunn, being a man of much worldly wisdom, had counselled the young physician not to lose sight of the smart widow and her handsome daughter.

"The Cardews know most people worth knowing," Mr. Dunn said shortly; "at their house you may come across men and women likely to be useful to you,

and Miss Cardew's fiancé, Sir Giles Tredman, is worth cultivating too. Some day he will be a very distinguished personage, if he goes on as he has begun: and his place, by the way, is not so very many miles from Stockley." The advice had remained in Berners' mind, and the afternoon he had just spent in the Cardews' house, made him realise that Mr. Dunn's words had been words of wisdom. The men and women who crowded his hostess's drawing-room, were precisely the men and women it was well to meet, and one woman's face in particular lingered in his memory, as he walked quickly eastwards en route to his club for dinner. Hugh Berners, in his busy life, had hitherto found little time to bestow much thought upon the other sex; he had worked hard at his profession, allowing little else to absorb his mind or thoughts. He had kept his hands and heart clean; living uprightly and purely, with a boyish simplicity, feeling that one day he would offer the best of himself to the woman he should ask to be his wife. But until now, the woman herself had not appeared above the rim of his horizon, and in all his eight and twenty years, he had hitherto seen no one who had more than temporarily quickened his pulses or his heart beats. But to-day, a woman's face had produced upon him quite an unusual impression, and whilst he threaded his way along the Knightsbridge pavement, he

mentally reproduced for himself feature after feature which had so impressed him.

"I want to introduce you to Miss Rosa Müller," Mrs. Cardew had said, leading him up to a tall girl who stood a little apart, near the folding doors of the inner drawing-room, "she has come to England to be near her uncle, who is a friend of ours. And I only wish," here the hostess had flashed a charming smile first at the girl, and then at the man, "I only wish I could speak Miss Müller's language a quarter as well as she can speak ours."

"Miss Müller's language presumably being German?" Berners answered, as he bowed to the tall girl, and noted with observing glance how deeply blue were her eyes, and what a delicious smile parted her well-cut lips.

"German," she answered, in a low voice, whose tones pleased his fastidious ear, "though I, myself, am quite cosmopolitan. I call myself of no nation. I belong everywhere." She spoke almost faultless English, the faintest possible accent only adding piquancy to her speech, and Berners noticed that her laugh held in it the same low, musical quality as her voice. Although possessed of no actual beauty, and assuredly vying in no single particular with the beautiful daughter of the house, there was about the young foreigner a haunting charm, which made an extraordinary appeal to Berners. She talked

easily and well; she was neither gauche nor forward; and those deep blue eyes of hers met his with a frankness that was essentially womanly, and with no trace of the coquette. Her conversation was as frank as her manner. Berners quickly learnt that she had lived at various times in most of the European capitals; that she was an orphan, whose nearest relative, an uncle, was now in London in the Diplomatic service, hence her presence in the English metropolis.

"Not that I live *with* my uncle," she added gaily, "he has always been accustomed to bachelor existence; a niece would be an encumbrance, and so I am in a hotel with my companion—who is not here to-day. My uncle is not here either—I have come alone to Mrs. Cardew, who is a friend of his. You know," her blue eyes smiled enchantingly into his, "I have always wished Providence had made me an Englishwoman. Englishwomen are the freest, the most charming, and I think, the happiest in the world."

Berners recalled these words now, and, looking through the railings of the Green Park at the freshness of trees and grass, still unspoiled by summer dust, he smiled as he reflected fancifully, that the girl he had just left possessed much of the freshness and sweetness we associate with early summer. He found himself resolving to cultivate the Cardews; he

wished that Miss Müller's uncle had been of the party to-day, that he might have made his acquaintance, and thereby laid up for himself possibilities of meeting his niece again, and he compared Rosa with the young ladies of Stockley, to the obvious and total disadvantage of all those estimable young people. During dinner, at which a friend joined him, his thoughts were perforce wrenched away from the events of the afternoon, to a discussion of a recent surgical discovery, and to genial gossip anent his own and his friend's old hospital. But he did not linger long in the club after dinner, and nine o'clock was striking in Big Ben's sonorous notes, as he walked across St. James's Park, and turned in the direction of the river. He was in a mood for walking, and for walking fast and far. He had more than half a mind, indeed, to tramp the whole distance to Stockley, but deciding against this, he determined to make for one of the South London stations on the line, and take the train from there instead of at a terminus. The night was very sultry, and heavy clouds rolling up from the north seemed to presage a thunderstorm, but as yet there was no sign of rain. Berners' quick walk slackened to a considerably slower pace, as the sultriness increased, and when he found himself in some of the less frequented thoroughfares on the Surrey side of the river, he took off his hat, and allowed what little air there was to play upon his

bare head. He had been walking for some time, without paying any close attention to his whereabouts, taking the right turnings almost mechanically, and allowing his thoughts to bring back to him all the conversation of the afternoon; but all at once he roused himself from his abstraction, to realise that he was in a narrow, dingy street, entirely unknown to him, and that in his absorption he had missed his way. He glanced at the sordid houses, whose dark and forbidding appearance seemed to indicate that the neighbourhood was a poor one, and the faces of the few passers-by who slouched past him, did not give him a reassuring idea of the character of the inhabitants. He stopped an evil-looking man, who eyed him askance, and asked civilly to be directed back into the main thoroughfare from which he had unconsciously drifted. The man scowled at him, but answered gruffly—

"Take the first turning on your left, Graham Street, follow it right along, that's your way." The night was growing rapidly darker; those rolling clouds from the north had spread over the sky, and as Berners, following his guide's direction, turned to the left, a few large drops of rain fell on his head. Putting on his hat, he began to wish—first, that he had not indulged in his ridiculous wish to walk an unnecessary number of miles; secondly, that he had not allowed his absence of mind to lead him into

this tangle of unknown and unsavoury streets, and his footsteps quickened as he realised along what a very narrow and very "mean" street he now walked.

The houses on each side struck him as unpleasantly lifeless and silent, the pavement and roadway were deserted, and even the distant rumble of the great city seemed deadened by the high buildings that nearly shut out the sky. Something in the darkness and the silence sent a little thrill along his nerves, strong man though he was, and quite ungiven to nervousness. He hurried on at a good round pace, oppressed with a vague fancy that out of those silent houses eyes were furtively watching his progress, and he was beginning to speculate how near the end of the street might be, when a sound of wheels broke the all-prevailing stillness, and to his intense surprise a small, well-appointed brougham drove smartly past him, and pulled up at the door of one of the grim buildings on his left. That such a carriage should be driving along such a thoroughfare at all, was in itself astonishing; that it should actually stop before one of the unprepossessing houses, added point to the astonishing fact, and Berners found himself involuntarily pausing on the pavement to see who would emerge from the brougham.

Immediately in front of the house at which

it had stopped, a lamp flickered in the now rising wind, and the young doctor saw a tall man emerge from the vehicle, and hold out his hand to help someone else alight. He could not see the man's face, a white muffler was tied round his neck, hiding his mouth and chin, and the soft hat he wore was drawn closely over his eyes, so that no part of his features was visible. As the second form sprang lightly from the brougham, Berners saw that it was a woman, slight and graceful, wearing a long cloak, over what was evidently an evening dress, and with black lace covering her hair and drawn close about her face. But as she stood upon the pavement beside her companion, a fresh gust of wind swept up the street blowing aside the lace that covered her head, and for a moment leaving her face fully exposed to the flickering gleams of the lamp that shone full upon it. And in that moment Hugh saw every feature distinctly, and seeing them, almost started forward with a low exclamation of surprise and dismay. For there was no possibility of mistaking that well-cut nose and chin, the delicate colouring, the brightness of the hair from which the lace had fallen, the shining of the deep eyes on which the lamplight beamed. This was the very woman of whom his thoughts had been so full, the woman to whom, a few hours before, he had been chatting in the Cardews' drawing-room, the woman who, in spite

of himself, had produced upon him so strange and unprecedented an impression. But what was she doing here, in this small back street of South London, at ten o'clock at night? What possible errand could have brought a woman of her class and character into this forlorn, God-forsaken spot? And what man was he who accompanied her, who was even now opening, with a latchkey, the door before which he and she stood? Why did Miss Rosa Müller allow any man to bring her to such a place, at such a time? Anger, jealousy, disgust, raged within the soul of the man who still stood silently watching the two from the other side of the street. A seething mass of emotion rose within him; he was conscious of a sudden upheaval in his soul of elemental passions and sensations of which he had believed himself incapable. The stirring of those primitive instincts prompted him to dash across the street, and demand an explanation of what seemed to him so utterly inexplicable. But long habits of self-control, long years of training in poise and balance, had taught him not to act on unguarded impulse, and he remained quietly where he was, watching the neat brougham, and the two figures beside it. The door of the house was quickly opened, the tall man turned to the woman, said something to her in accents inaudible to Berners, and the next instant they had both disappeared into the house, and the door had clanged

softly behind them. With the closing of the door the coachman on the box flicked his horse with the whip, and almost before Berners could realise what had happened, the brougham drove swiftly away and vanished out of sight, round the corner of a side street. Moved by a curiosity most rare to him, the doctor crossed the street, and deliberately approaching the house into which the man and woman had just gone, he peered at the number on the door, and looked up at the unpretentious walls and windows. The building was as grim, gloomy, and silent as all the rest of the buildings in this gloomy street, just a two-storey grey house, like thousands of other houses in London, with windows so closely shuttered or curtained that no ray of light could penetrate through them; with nothing to mark it as in any way different from the dwellings opposite or on either side of it. Yet Berners gazed up and down its black, non-committal façade, as though he expected to find in it something out of the way, something bizarre or sinister. An insane desire, with difficulty suppressed, made him long to ring at the bell and demand entrance, to discover for himself what the house contained, and why the woman, of whom he had dreamt such pleasant dreams, should have entered there. But he behaved as a normal, well-balanced Englishman would have behaved under like circumstances. He merely

scanned the house up and down for the third time with interested, enquiring eyes, and then said to himself slowly, under his breath—

"Thirteen, Graham Street—Thirteen, Graham Street."

CHAPTER X.

"TRACE THE JEWEL!"

THE room was square, small, and furnished with the utmost simplicity. In the centre was a table covered with a red cloth, and on the table were an open blotting book, an inkstand and some pens. Round the table six chairs were ranged at regular intervals, and against the dingily papered walls were two armchairs covered with uncompromising horsehair. A deal cupboard stood beside the little fireplace, and on the floor was a most inadequate square of cheap carpet. Beyond these the room had nothing, excepting an American eight-day clock, which stood on the mantelpiece, and ticked loudly and aggressively after the manner of its kind. No other sound broke the total stillness of the little apartment; plainly it was at the back of the house, and any noises from the street outside would not penetrate into it. The couple of people who sat

there together, sat in such silence that when at last one of them spoke, his voice seemed to awaken scores of slumbering echoes, and the woman, lost in reverie in the armchair, started and uttered a quick exclamation.

"I did not have you brought here to indulge in day dreams," her companion said roughly, though in his well-bred voice there was a singular and penetrating charm, "I sent for you to give you more explicit directions than I was able to do before. Where is Michael?"

"He brought me here, and put me into this room. I do not know where he went. You must remember this house is strange to——"

"Yes, yes, we needn't waste time over explanations. It was necessary that you should come to this house. You know by now that I make no arrangements that are not necessary. As the great English poet said: 'There is method in my madness.'"

"You wanted me for some definite purpose?" The two spoke rapidly—in French—and it was noticeable that, although there was a look of high courage in the woman's face, she seemed to shrink a little back in her chair when she met her companion's eyes. They were eyes which, once seen, were not easy to forget, eyes vividly blue in colour, and with a most com-

pelling and penetrating glance. Perhaps the woman, who shrank back as her own glance met them, felt, as others had felt before her, that those bright blue eyes could look into her very soul, and even read her thoughts, and she looked away from the strong masterful face that watched her, and fixed her gaze on the deal cupboard by the fireplace.

"Naturally, I wanted you for a definite purpose," the man answered drily, rising and standing before the fireplace, "I have a special work for you." As he stood there, his dominating personality seemed to fill the whole of the small room, and to overawe still further the woman in the chair. Her eyes came back unwillingly to his face, her gloved hands that had rested quietly in her lap, moved restlessly, and she began to pull off first one glove and then the other, as though the slight movement lessened the sense of strain.

"Then you no longer want me to continue what I have been doing," she said; "am I to play a totally different part?"

"You have often been in England before—you understand that," came the answer, spoken sharply and imperiously, "but, hitherto, you have only stayed in hotels; that is the rôle you are to adopt."

"Only stayed in hotels," she repeated mechanically after him, "and— then——"

"Then—your uncle was anxious," a somewhat sardonic smile crossed his handsome face, "you were anxious yourself—to learn something of English family life, something more than can be learnt in hotels. Your uncle, therefore," he spoke more slowly, his eyes fixed significantly upon her face, "your uncle has decided to find a suitable family with whom you could live for a time, from whom you could learn all that is best of the home life of England."

"Yes," she said, interrogatively, "so far I follow you without difficulty. I am to go to live somewhere *en famille*, but where?—and why? May I know why? Or is the reason for this step not to be explained? You—" she paused, and looked into his masterful face with a smile, "you—are Mr. Müller, and I—your niece, Rosa?"

"I am Mr. Müller, and you my niece Rosa—quite so," he replied, "and I do propose to tell you my reason for sending you to Stockley."

"Stockley? Why, Stockley? It is a suburb, is it not? I thought suburbs were——"

"The invention of the evil one? They are. But at this moment a suburb chances to be the place in which an important piece of work can be done; and

I intend to entrust the work to you, my dear Rosa."

A smile parted the well-cut but cruel lips that were not hidden by his black moustache, and he bent a little towards her, looking deep into her eyes with his own compelling glance. Her hands stirred uneasily again, she moved her head much as a frightened animal moves when a snake first begins to fascinate it, then with a quick gesture she flung back her cloak, revealing the costly evening dress below it.

"What is the work?" she said, after an almost imperceptible pause, "not—to track—" and her voice died into silence, whilst the colour ebbed out of her cheeks.

"You are far too squeamish, my dear child," Müller laughed easily; "what I am asking you to do will hurt nobody. It is only a question of the proper person getting his rights; and—in this case—I am the proper person."

"Then it is not—work of the Holy——"

"It is work for me," Müller interrupted sharply. "It is a private matter, or—at least it is mainly private—though," he paused, and studied her face with keen scrutiny, "though the matter is not *only* of importance to me," he added, slowly and significantly. The woman's eyes were caught and held

by that significant glance, the colour mounted to her face, she turned her head again with that same restless movement, which was so like the movement of a frightened creature fascinated by a reptile.

"Then," she said at last, with hesitation, "I suppose—I must do—what you wish."

"Certainly you must do what I wish." The decisive coldness of the words spoken in that musical voice, seemed to add to their force, and a shiver ran through Rosa. She drew her wrap closely about her again, and there was a tremulousness in her voice as she answered—

"Tell me what it is I am to do for you. I would rather know quickly what my new business is to be." There was an accent of uneasiness in her tones, which did not escape the ear of the listening man; he looked at her more sharply than before.

"You are not getting tired of the work?" Some peculiar note in his voice, some new ring of a sternness that was positively sinister, made her draw herself into an upright position, and the signs of weariness were wiped from her face, as though a sponge had been passed across it. No one, seeing the sudden renewal of vigour and interest that had come over her, would have guessed that a flash of

fear had stirred the depths of her soul, that only long habits of self-control saved her from letting the flash of fear look out of her eyes.

"Tired of the work?" she said, her own voice as cool and decisive as his—some rare histrionic power enabling her to punctuate her words with a little laugh—"what an idea! I am tired to-night, because I have been busy all day, first at one social function, then at another, and working all the time. I am simply tired in my body, that is all."

Müller shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, well," he responded, "I suppose one must remember that you are only a woman, in spite of your magnificent physique; and as long as you are only tired in body"—he paused and smiled a strange smile—"there is nothing that need be said. But, for those who tire of the work——" He broke off abruptly, and again their eyes met fully and squarely, but this time there was no shrinking or even a hint of fear in her.

"I understand," she answered, putting out her hands with a gay little gesture, and laughing a gay little laugh; "you need not enter into more minute explanations—Uncle Sebastian," she glanced at him archly, with a repetition of the charming laugh,

"and now tell me exactly what you want of me in this suburb, Stockley, and let me go home to bed."

"You are my niece wishing to know something of English family life. I, in my diplomatic career, especially busy at present, am unable to do as much in the way of taking you about as I should like. You want a home where you can combine town and country life, that is why we search out of London for what we require. You follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"A gentleman I meet in the City, Mr. Stansdale, the last of a good old family, now fallen on evil days, has a home with a sister in Stockley. They will be glad to receive a paying guest. My niece—is glad to be that guest. She goes to them, she makes herself as pleasant and charming as it is in her nature to be, she becomes extremely intimate with the elderly lady, Mr. Stansdale's sister. She learns"—he spoke with increased slowness and emphasis—"she learns every detail about their family, about *every member of that family.*"

"Are there many members of it?" Rosa looked a little puzzled.

"Mr. Stansdale and one sister live together. Another sister is taking a post, very much against

her brother's wishes, I gather, and he has not confided to me what or where her work will be. That is an unimportant detail. But there was another sister, much younger, who"—his eyes suddenly shifted their gaze from her face—"who is dead; at least, I believe her to be dead. She at one time played a part in my life. She had in her possession a jewel which it is vital I should find. And so far I cannot trace its whereabouts. Circumstances"—he made so long a pause that his companion glanced at him in surprise—"circumstances have made it difficult for me to prosecute searching enquiries about what became of the jewel, and of all the things belonging to the Stansdales' youngest sister. By hook or by crook, you must discover everything you can about her, and about all that was hers. Probe these Stansdales thoroughly, but probe them so delicately that they do not know their family skeletons are being turned out of the cupboard. You understand?"

"I understand, up to a certain point. But do you suppose this jewel you mention is in the Stansdales' care?"

"I don't know where it is," was the irritable reply, "if I *knew* anything definitely, I might be able to lay my hand upon what it is most important I

should have. But I know nothing excepting that an interfering, meddlesome fool has put a spoke in my wheel."

"Who is the fool?"

"That ass Tredman, who is by way of being engaged to Miss Cardew. I fancy I may find means to spoke his wheels more effectually than he has done mine. We shall see. He happened to be on the spot when —when the youngest of the Stansdales' sisters died. Mind, I only believe she died. I cannot even be sure of that. Circumstances have prevented my discovering the true facts of the case. Possibly you will be able by roundabout means to find out all I wish to know. But the chief aim of your visit to Stockley, is to discover the whereabouts of the jewel, and if possible to get it for me."

"Do you want it stolen?" A faintly ironical tone crept into her voice.

"If necessary—yes. Chance led me to stumble across Mr. Stansdale, of whom I had only known before by hearsay, and that chance I intend to use to the best advantage. Therefore I send you to be an inmate of their house, and to ferret out for me all that can be ferreted."

"And this jewel? How shall I know it? What is it like? Is it very valuable?"

Again came that shrug of the shoulders, accompanied by a deprecating gesture of the hands.

"Oh! it is worth a little something, nothing very tremendous, because the stones are not genuine. It consists of a pendant with a emerald (an imitation emerald) in its centre. The colouring is particularly bright, and it is surrounded by diamonds. Hanging from them by a fine chain of brilliants is a locket of emeralds and diamonds, and the locket when opened—— However, that is a detail of no importance whatever, for neither you nor any other human being, who did not know its secret, could open that locket. The description I have given you, should make it quite easy for you to recognise the jewel."

"Oh! quite easy," Rosa got up from her chair, "and I gather that you do not only wish me to get this bauble for you. You also want me to find out exactly what has happened to the Stansdales' youngest sister. Is her name Stansdale too, by the way? Or was she married?"

"Her name is not Stansdale, but I have no idea what she called herself," the words were in themselves an ugly sneer, "yes, find out everything about her, *everything*," his eyes gleamed maliciously; "it is possible she had a child, there was a child in the

carriage when—ah! well, never mind about that—find out everything, you are clever enough to do it all. Trace the woman; trace the child if there was a child; and above all, trace the jewel, and put it into my hands."

CHAPTER XI.

GILES' HOME.

"I DON'T believe there could be a more beautiful house in all the world."

"Don't you, Sylvia? Well! I am inclined to endorse your opinion; and I can't pretend to be sorry it is mine. A fit setting for the woman who is coming here as its queen," Giles added under his breath, as he laid a hand on Sylvia's shoulder and looked out of the window across the wide landscape bathed in the sunshine of May.

"Do you mean Miss Cardew when you say its queen?" the child questioned, lifting grave eyes to his face; "will she be the queen of this lovely house?"

"Yes, dear, I meant that," a dusky colour mounted into Giles' bronzed cheeks; "you see, Miss Cardew is going to be my wife, and my wife will be the queen of my home, and of everything I have. Don't you agree with me, little woman, that there could not be a lovelier queen?"

"I think Miss Cardew's got a very lovely face," Sylvia answered slowly, "but I'm afraid she might find it rather dull and quiet here. She doesn't like country things much; and won't she miss all the people and the lots and lots of parties?"

Giles laughed, and his hand rested for a moment on the child's dark hair.

"Women are so wonderful," he said, a note of triumph in his voice, "so wonderful that when a woman loves a man, she is ready to give up the kind of life she likes best herself, and live the man's life instead."

"I shouldn't think Miss Cardew was like that," came the prompt reply, spoken with childish impetuosity, and Giles looked down at her, surprised incredulity on his face.

"Ah! but she is like that," he answered slowly, "she has a soul as beautiful as her beautiful face. You mustn't think otherwise, little girl. Not that I am going to ask her to sacrifice all her social life for me. When we settle down we shall be part of the year in town, I would not condemn her too much to the country. She must not be buried here. And when she is here, the house will always be full of people if she likes it."

"I think she will like it," Sylvia said shrewdly, her eyes fixed on Giles' face, over which a shadow of wistfulness had suddenly crept.

"Then she shall have it," he replied briskly, thrusting away the dreams he had dreamt of a home in which he and Grace would revel in each other's society, with no tiresome guests to entertain and amuse. "When we come back from India," he went on, his hand touching the child's dusky hair, "we shall find you grown up and ready to help us look after the house and all the people who stay in it. You will be the queen's right hand, won't you?"

"I should like to be your right hand best," Sylvia said quickly, her eyes meeting his with a look of loving adoration; "you see, I'm not sure that Miss Cardew will want me to do things for her. I don't believe she's very fond of little girls."

"She will like this little girl," Giles answered promptly, putting his arm round the child, and drawing her close to him, "you belong to me, and Grace and I will be one, so you will belong to her as well. And we shall find our little girl ready for us here when we come home."

"I wish you hadn't got to go to India," Sylvia said, her soft hands clinging to his; "I wish you were going to be here always, you and me, just as we are now. I don't like when things change."

"Poor little girl, none of us are very fond of changes, and you have had to learn so young how many changes and chances there are in this mortal

life. Never mind, Sylvia, some day we will settle down into this beautiful home of mine, and you can't think how happy we shall all be."

"I can think how happy I should be if you were always with me," she answered with childlike simplicity, "it's when I remember about your going away that something inside me hurts. I can't bear the way it hurts sometimes." Her eyes darkened with swift pain, and Giles patted her shoulder caressingly, his voice taking on a caressing tone. "You mustn't think too much about hurting, only think all the time that I shan't be very long away, and that you must use every minute of the time, to learn to be everything a grown-up young lady has got to be."

"The sort of grown-up young lady you would like?" she asked.

"Yes, just the sort I should like," he answered. "I shall expect something very splendid. And now let us go all round the garden and see how everything is looking. Grace may be coming down one day this week."

But Grace did not go down that week, nor the next, nor the next,—and by and by Sylvia said sagely to Miss Stansdale—

"I don't believe Miss Cardew wants to come and see this lovely place. She is always too busy every time Monsieur asks her."

"Have you always called Sir Giles, Monsieur?" Helen Stansdale said, with a smile, "and why do you call him that?"

"Because, you see, I began it when first we met," Sylvia, curled up in the broad window seat of the schoolroom, looked across at her governess and smiled, "Mummy and I had lived a lot in France, and you say Monsieur to every gentleman there. I think it's very pretty to say it. So when Sir Giles came, I said Monsieur to him, and then, afterwards, when we got to England, I just still called him that, and I like it. It means, sir, you see, and Sir Giles is a knight, isn't he? I read the other day about somebody who was, 'a very parfit, gentil knight.' Monsieur is like that, isn't he?"

"Indeed, I think he is," little Miss Stansdale answered quickly, "I never knew anybody so thoughtful and considerate, and yet he is quite a young man. I should like to see the lady he is going to marry. To be his wife she ought to be almost perfect."

Miss Helen's gentle soul bubbled over with enthusiasm, and with that highest sentiment which is far removed from sickly sentimentality, and her small charge understood her.

"I think Monsieur ought to have the best queen in the world," she said, "he thinks there isn't any queen like Miss Cardew. But she doesn't care about

making him happy all the time, she lets him do everything for her. I wish she would come here, because it hurts him when she doesn't come. And when things hurt him, they hurt me," the child added quaintly. Helen Stansdale looked tenderly at the small white face and deep eyes. During the few weeks she had been at Manderby Court, she had learnt to love the little girl who was in some ways so old-fashioned and knowledgeable, in others such an absolute child. Life in Sir Giles' household was a real rest and refreshment to the gentle little lady, who had found existence in her brother's suburban villa almost insupportable, and her brother himself a very sharp thorn in the flesh. That Robert had, as he himself put it, "washed his hands of her," she regretted, because in her gentleness of soul, she would have regretted anything that militated against peace: but it was an undoubted relief to be out of the sphere of Robert's blustering voice, and Robert's overbearing masterfulness. And her own conscience upheld her in the course she had taken. She was sure it had been right to come away and earn money for herself, instead of being dependent on Robert's bounty, a bounty grudgingly and grumblingly bestowed.

In Giles Tredman's house she found congenial surroundings, and he himself treated the little lady with a chivalrous courtesy and respect, such as her

brother would have considered quite superfluous to bestow upon a woman. She sometimes wondered whether the life at Manderby would be so peaceful and desirable when the master of the house brought a wife to reign there by his side; but she had a thread of philosophy in her composition, and consoled herself with the reflection that, as Sir Giles proposed to take his wife to India, it would be some time before they finally settled down in their English home. And meanwhile, she and Sylvia would enjoy the loveliness to their hearts' content, and with only each other for company. Miss Stansdale's one regret in leaving her brother's house, had been the thought that she was leaving her sister Marion alone with Robert. But Marion's last letter had removed that feeling of compunction, for it had overflowed with expressions of admiration for the German lady, who, by Robert's wish, had come as a paying guest.

"Miss Müller is quite charming," so ran the letter which lay in Helen's lap whilst Sylvia talked to her, "she is very good looking—I think I might call her handsome, and she is so kind and interested in everything and everybody. She makes a delightful companion, and never lets me feel dull for a moment. How I wish you and your dear little charge could come over in the motor one afternoon and see her, that is, if Sir Giles would not object."

Although by train Manderby Court was not easy of

access from Stockley, it was no great distance for a motor to travel, and when on a pleasant June day a few weeks after the foregoing conversation, Miss Stansdale asked Sir Giles' leave to take her pupil to see her sister, he smilingly and promptly agreed.

"I shall be in town for the day," he said. "By all means drive over to Stockley. Start directly after lunch, have tea there, if your sister will be good enough to give it to you and Sylvia, and come back in the cool of the evening."

"And Marion is quite sure to be at home," Miss Helen said excitedly to Sylvia. "She has tea in the garden on these hot days. Of course the garden is only about the size of a pocket handkerchief," she added deprecatingly, "but it seems better than indoors."

It seemed to little Sylvia a great deal better than indoors, as they walked out of the small and rather stuffy house, to a trim lawn, surrounded by equally trim beds; for, although a vista of semi-detached residences stretched away as far as the eye could see, and a railway embankment loomed large at the end of the garden, it was at least a green and cool place in which to sit, and tea under an acacia-tree looked very inviting.

Miss Marion did not make the same appeal to the child as Miss Helen had done, but she took an

instant liking to the tall girl who emerged from the house shortly after their arrival.

"This is Miss Müller," Miss Marion explained, in fluttering, hurried accents. "My sister has motored over with little Miss Burnett. That is the best of motors, they do go so fast, even though I am afraid of them myself, and they do smell so very unpleasant," she added with her small, nervous laugh.

"And this is the Sylvia Miss Marion tells me about," the newcomer said brightly, seating herself in a garden seat next to the child, and looking at her with kind, frank eyes. "Sylvia has always been one of my pet names, but—this is not a case, is it, of who is Sylvia?"

As she spoke she laughed pleasantly, and the little girl edged closer to her, and put her hand confidingly into the other's white hand.

"I like you," she whispered, her words being audible only to Rosa Müller, whilst the two sisters chatted together, also in undertones.

"Your eyes make me think of forget-me-nots."

"That is very prettily said," came the quick answer, and the slightly foreign accent with which Rosa spoke fell pleasantly on Sylvia's ears, "I would rather have a compliment from a little girl like you, than from lots of grown-up people. You mean what you say."

"I don't think I know quite exactly what a

compliment means," Sylvia answered, "but I do mean what I say, and so does Monsieur mean what he says."

"Monsieur? Who is he?"

"He's my guardian," a smile flashed out over the little face, to be followed instantly by a sadness very pathetic in any one so young. "When mummy died she asked Sir Giles to take care of me, and so I'm his little girl now, you see?"

"I see," Rosa answered, making herself agreeable more because it was her nature, and part of her stock in trade, so to speak, to make herself universally pleasant, than because she was particularly interested in the child beside her. "I suppose you live in your guardian's house, with him and his wife?"

"Well, he hasn't got a wife—not yet, but Miss Cardew is going to be his wife soon."

"Miss Cardew," Rosa was arrested by the name—"Miss Grace Cardew?"

Sylvia nodded.

"I have seen her," Rosa said slowly, "but I thought, I didn't think—" she pulled herself up sharply, memory recalling to her a picture of Grace Cardew in deep and earnest conversation with the tall dark man who was so completely the arbiter of her own destiny. Grace Cardew—Herman Müller—and this child's guardian—what were the actual

relations between the three? And what was Müller's game? The sudden stream of thought held her silent, and Sylvia sat looking at her with shy, respectful admiration, whilst still the two sisters chatted on together, in rapid undertones. The colour was going and coming on Miss Marion's cheeks, and Miss Helen's eyes looked a little troubled, as she said emphatically, and in a low voice—

"I see the likeness you mean, of course, Marion. I hadn't seen it before, but I see it now. But it can be nothing but a chance likeness. It is not likely Sir Giles would have been Sylvia's guardian, unless he were an old friend of her family, and knew all about her mother's people. It is just a chance that she is so like——"

"Yes, it must be, just a chance," Marion interrupted hurriedly. "I don't know what made me notice it or mention it. It was very wrong of me to speak of—of—Tiny," she dropped her voice yet more; "but it startled me just at first when I saw little Sylvia. She is so like what our little one was—once."

Her sister had no time to reply to her words, for at this moment a man's form was seen advancing from the house, and Hugh Berners walked across the lawn to greet the assembled party.

"I like that big man very much," Sylvia whispered to her new friend, when, having shaken hands with every one, the doctor seated himself

between the two elder ladies. "He's so big and strong, and he has the same kind of eyes as Monsieur. They look, so—so straight and true, and as if they saw right into you." At the child's words, a curious expression flitted across Rosa's face, and she winced a little.

"They look so straight and true, and as if they saw right into you."

The words so exactly described those straightforward grey eyes, which had learnt to look at her with such a world of meaning in their depths; those eyes which had a strange and uncomfortable power of stirring into wakefulness the conscience which she had fancied was for ever lulled to sleep; of arousing in her emotions which she had hitherto regarded with a sort of scorn. When Hugh presently came to her side, her heart gave a little leap of pleasure, and though she tried to assure herself contemptuously that it was absurd of her to indulge in such sensations, that leap of the heart had brought a softness into her eyes which would not be hidden. And whilst he sat and talked to her and to Sylvia under the acacia on the suburban lawn, a great sense of shame swept over her, as she remembered the errand upon which she had come amongst these simple kindly people. Meeting Hugh's frank eyes, she loathed herself, and all her life of intrigue and subtlety; she hated the remembrance that she was

here under totally false pretences; she hated above all, the man who was making use of her as his tool. And yet she had been his tool so long, that she did not feel capable of resisting the power which held her in its iron grasp. To struggle against that compelling personality, would be as futile as the struggle of a tiny creature of the jungle held in the tiger's grip; and even whilst Sylvia's soft hand grasped hers, and she listened to Hugh's deep voice, she was haunted by the despairing certainty that her errand must be fulfilled at all costs, come what might.

Miss Helen and her charge left Stockley before six o'clock, and the young doctor and Rosa stood side by side at the gate, to watch the motor glide swiftly down the road, and disappear over the brow of the hill. Both were silent for a moment, then Hugh turned to his companion, and said abruptly—

"How that little child loves you."

The softened note in his voice startled her. She had already learnt to know that when he spoke most abruptly, he felt most deeply, and, afraid of him, afraid of herself, with a new and hitherto unknown fear, she turned away from the gate, and laughed. Her laugh was hard, and totally lacking in feeling; her voice, too, was hard and brisk.

"Loves me, oh, no!" she said, avoiding his eyes, and snapping off a leaf from the clematis over the porch. "I am not in the least a child's woman.

Children and I have nothing in common, nothing." She sauntered into the house, humming a gay little music-hall ditty, but she was aware of the hurt expression that sprang into his eyes, of the surprised incredulity in his face, and something stabbed at her own heart, even though she laughed again.

CHAPTER XII.

"I CAN'T UNDO MY FEELING FOR HER."

"AND she died?"

"We don't really know." Miss Marion's eyes looked nervously round the drawing-room, then returned to Rosa's face; her voice dropped to a whisper. "You see, my brother never allowed us to mention her, he was so very angry with her when she went away."

"I cannot quite understand why she did go away?" Rosa spoke gently. A life spent in much scheming had taught her infinite patience, and she gave no sign that Miss Marion's garrulous verbosity irritated her. "She was your younger sister—this lady you call Tiny?"

"Yes, our youngest, quite a baby compared to Helen and me." Miss Marion's voice shook. "And so very sweet, so lovely—but quite, quite different from the rest of us. She always wanted another

kind of life—more chance of going about, of seeing people; she was so attractive."

"And she married?" Rosa's voice was still very patient.

"Robert would be most terribly angry with me if he knew I had told you." Marion's low voice became yet lower. "Over and over again he has said he will not have Tiny mentioned."

"But why?" Rosa laughed, "and why should you look on your brother's commands as laws of the Medes and Persians? There isn't any commandment saying we must obey our brothers, is there?"

Miss Marion looked a little shocked.

"Oh! my dear, but Robert has always been a good brother to us, and we ought to respect his wishes. You see, he felt that Tiny had cut herself off for ever from all of us when she—ran away with—somebody, and we don't know, we never knew, who it was; we think it was just some adventurer—and——"

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Stansdale never tried to find out with whom his sister—his little young sister—had run away?" Rosa broke in, strong indignation in her accents. "I suppose she was just a bit of a girl?"

"Just a bit of a girl," Miss Marion repeated dreamily, a faint smile on her face, "she was eighteen, and so very pretty, with eyes that seemed

to show her soul through them, and hair that was like a dusky cloud, and her face was delicate and white—like—like—do you know"—Miss Marion stooped forward suddenly, and laid a hand on Rosa's knee—"do you know, that little child Sylvia Burnett made me think of my dear sister, Tiny. She is like her—so like what Tiny was at her age."

"*Sylvia—Burnett?* But had not Miss Helen noticed the likeness too?"

"Helen would not remember Tiny so well as I do. I am much older than both my sisters. But even Helen noticed the likeness when I pointed it out, only she thought it was a coincidence. It gave me quite a shock when the child came across the lawn, and held out her hand, and smiled at me. All in a flash Tiny came before me, just as I remember her on our lawn in the old house."

"But what connection could Sir Giles Tredman's ward have with your sister?" Rosa questioned, her busy brain striving to unravel the puzzle presented to it. "Surely Sir Giles must know everything about little Sylvia's antecedents? She is probably the child of some relation of his own."

"Helen has never heard any particulars about her. She says Sir Giles only said Sylvia was his ward, and that he had sole charge of her."

"Did you ever know whether your sister had any

children ? " Rosa asked, one conjecture after another chasing itself across her brain.

" We never knew anything about her after she went away, never anything at all. She was staying with friends in London when she met the man who made her leave us. When she came home we noticed that she was not like herself. By turns she seemed wild with joy and miserably unhappy, and then one afternoon when Helen and I came back from paying some visits, we found a note from her to say she had gone away to join the man she loved." Miss Marion's voice broke in a sob.

" But you knew the man's name ? "

" He was not English; at least, I think not." Rosa suddenly sat upright, and listened with close attention. " Tiny told us of a foreign gentleman she had met. She said he was a Pole, but his name seemed more German than Polish—it was Schmidt."

" A foreigner ? " Rosa repeated, paying no heed to the latter part of her companion's sentence, " and your sister went abroad with him ? "

" We think so. Just for a little while we had cards from her, signed T. Schmidt, and saying she was well and happy. But she gave no address. Only the postcards showed us she was moving about all over the Continent. And after a time we heard no more."

"And your brother made no attempt to trace her?"

"He wrote to her just once." Marion's voice quivered with pain. "She once gave us an address, in Paris it was, and she asked us if we would write and forgive her for having hurt us. But Robert would not let us write, he wrote himself—a letter that told her he would never forgive her—never, for having disgraced us all. But he would not let us send her any message, and since that day we have heard nothing. We do not even know whether she is alive or dead."

Rosa heard the words, but they were scarcely more than meaningless sounds in her ears, for other words, spoken in a man's deep voice, swung to and fro in her mind—"At one time she played a part in my life." What part had Tiny Stansdale played in the life of the man who now called himself Müller? And if she were really dead, where was the jewel of which he so evidently desired to regain possession? And, was it even remotely possible that this child, Sylvia Burnett, with her strange likeness to the Stansdales' sister, could be more closely linked with that sister than anyone supposed. Could it be possible? Rosa's brain continued to revolve that proposition, whilst Marion babbled on of the past, of Tiny, of cherished memories of the old home; and by and by the younger woman's thoughts crystallised into a distinct resolution.

"It may be all a fancy," she told herself, "but, on the other hand, there may be something in it, and I shall act on the assumption that there is that something. I must discover where the jewel is that the worthy Müller requires, and, if he needs it, I suppose I must get the jewel." When she arrived at this resolution she was alone in her own bedroom, and she shrugged her shoulders, and glanced at herself in the looking-glass, at the same time giving vent to a cynical laugh.

"After all, I have always been with schemers, and I am clever at the game. Why should I spoil my own chances of getting on, because an insignificant doctor looks at me with the eyes of a frank boy? Rosa Müller, pull yourself together and be sensible. You are more likely to have the ball at your feet, if you do what the good Hermann tells you, than if you listen to your silly heart, and yet more silly conscience. You must not let yourself be disturbed by a pair of grey eyes, and—a good man would not have anything to do with you."

The cynical smile left her lips, her eyes that a moment before had looked mockingly into the glass, lost all their brightness, a great sadness seemed to look out of them, and she turned away from the dressing-table with a choking sensation in her throat.

"*A good man!*" she exclaimed bitterly, "what

part or lot could I have in a good man's life? And yet, if things had been different, if I had been different," that sob in her throat again threatened to choke her, "I might have found all my happiness in a good man's love. As it is——" She did not end her sentence, but flinging out her arms with a gesture oddly suggestive of despair, she sat down at her writing-table, and writing a carefully worded note, addressed it to "Miss Helen Stansdale, c/o Sir Giles Tredman, Manderby Court, Birdsbrook."

That note surprised Helen when she opened it at the breakfast-table next morning, and she looked up from perusing it with a little puzzled frown on her face.

"I can't quite understand why—Miss Müller—or, I think Miss Müller must have misunderstood me," she said, looking across at Sir Giles with deprecating, startled eyes, "she seems to fancy I said she could come over here and see me and Sylvia, but, really—I don't think—I am almost sure—I never suggested such a thing."

"Who is Miss Müller? She is quite welcome to come here," Sir Giles answered good-naturedly. "Any friend of yours would be welcome, Miss Stansdale."

"But she isn't a friend of mine," the little lady said in flurried accents. "I only saw her the other day for the first time. She is staying with my

brother and sister. She,—well,—really she is a paying guest," Helen added, her face flushing, her head a little more erect than usual.

"She is the young lady Sylvia liked so much?" Giles said with a smile. "Sylvia has told me about her charm. By all means ask her over here. Would she come to lunch? Or would she spend the night?"

"It is very good of you, very kind indeed," Helen answered, with gentle dignity. "I can't understand why she should take it for granted that we shall be expecting her one day. She writes as if—as if I had spoken of her coming here, but I really think she must have misunderstood."

Seeing her troubled face, Sir Giles laughed kindly.

"Don't worry yourself as to how the idea came about," he said. "In whatever way the idea of her coming originated, Miss Müller is more than welcome to come. Sylvia's eyes are shining like two stars over the prospect of seeing her new friend."

"I did like that lady," the child said simply; "she had eyes like the forget-me-nots down by the river, and her voice is all deep and soft. I liked the doctor too, and I think he liked that pretty lady."

"So you liked the doctor?" Giles, rising to leave the drawing-room, laid his hand on Sylvia's soft hair, "is he going to cut me out in your heart?"

Sylvia laughed, her low, rippling laugh, and catching at the hand that caressed her hair, she pressed a loving little kiss upon it.

"You're different from everybody else," she said, looking up at him with a world of adoration in her eyes. "There couldn't be more than one Monsieur: you are—my very parfit, gentil knight."

"Bless the child! I can't aspire to be a Chaucer hero," Giles said laughingly, but his eyes were very tender as they met those loving ones, and in his letter to Grace that day he allowed himself to paint glowing pictures of a future in which she would play the part of loving mother to the child who had wound herself about his heart.

The easy success of the scheme by which she should obtain access to Manderby Court, almost startled Rosa. The simply-worded, kindly invitation to spend the night there because it was a long expedition for one day, gave her an uncomfortable sense of having schemed overmuch, simplicity and straightforwardness would have gained her ends for her as easily as subtlety, only she had never learnt to do anything simply and straightforwardly. And though now her point was gained, she was almost ashamed to take advantage of Sir Giles' kindly hospitality, the old instinct of obedience to her evil genius prompted her to accept the invitation, and make the most of the time at her disposal. Her resolution

was not a little shaken, when, on the day she went to Manderby Court, she came face to face with Hugh Berners at the station; and when, moreover, she noticed that his greeting was less spontaneous, less cordial than it had been hitherto. Her flippancy had hurt him, as she had intended it to do, and now his more distant manner hurt her in return. She all at once felt absurdly young and girlish, as she looked at his tall figure; she experienced a sudden longing to seize his hand, to tell him the whole truth about herself, and her life of scheming and adventure: she wanted to feel his arms about her, and to cry like a little child upon his breast. But she resisted all impulses towards confession, and the very quietness of his greeting checked the wave of impetuous longing that had swept over her; whilst he left the station feeling disturbed and sore, yet obsessed by the thought of her face, haunted by the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand.

"She is hard, she is flippant, she is the type of woman I have always disliked and despised, and yet I can't help thinking about her," the young doctor reflected as he went his rounds. "I have let myself imagine her something quite different, and now that I have found out she is just a smart, hard woman of the world, a sexless peacock, it is too late. I can't undo my feeling for her." Which train of thought, if she could have known of it, would have gone far

to comfort Rosa for his stiffness of demeanour to herself. Throughout her journey, the remembrance of his coldness remained with her, and she only shook it off by a persistent effort, when she reached Birdsbrook, and prepared for what she inwardly called her plan of campaign.

"It is most kind and good of Sir Giles to let me spend a night here," she said to Helen with her sweetest and most ingratiating smile. "I am sorry he is away. I should have liked to thank him in person. You do not know what a privilege it is for a foreigner like myself, to see one of these beautiful mansions of yours. And to sleep here!" she put up her hands expressively. "I was only grateful for the opportunity your kind suggestion gave me to offer myself for the afternoon."

Miss Helen racked her brains in vain to recollect what words of hers could have led Miss Müller to suppose she intended any suggestion of the kind: but as no such words had ever been uttered, the racking of her brain was naturally useless. And Miss Müller, having accepted her stumblingly-expressed greeting, turned to Sylvia, who watched her with shining eyes.

"I'm glad you've come," the child said, "I did want to see you again. Only I'm sorry you won't see Monsieur. You see he has gone to London to

arrange about his wedding. It will be in a few weeks now. I think you would like Monsieur."

"I am sure I should," Rosa answered warmly, congratulating herself that a certain good nature which belonged to the better part of her character had made her friendly to Sylvia on the occasion of their first meeting, "but all the same, I haven't come here to see Sir Giles. I want to talk to you and Miss Helen all the time. And you must show me the beautiful house and grounds."

"May I show you everything, my own self?" Sylvia's voice was eager.

"Yes, everything." Rosa well knew how to infuse into her voice an intensely fascinating quality; "you shall take me to your very pet corners of the garden and park, and let me see your own room, and show me that I am a real, true friend."

Sylvia's face flushed with delight, and simple-hearted Miss Helen looked gratefully into the beautiful face of their guest, whilst Rosa felt that she was winning her victory with an ease that gave her again a hideous sense of shame.

"But I shall go through with it now," she thought, metaphorically setting her teeth. "I have come so far, and I won't turn back."

So it came about that, whilst Miss Helen sat on the terrace, placidly knitting, and thinking how charming it was of Miss Müller to interest herself so whole-

heartedly in a little girl, the little girl sat with her pretty new friend in the pergola covered with roses, and without let or hindrance opened her childish heart to the blue-eyed lady.

Such an easy victory! Little Sylvia's confidence was freely offered to one who had already gained her heart; and with a voice that shook, and eyes misty with tears, the child told Rosa the story of her mother's tragic death.

"It was a black car that ran into us," she said, "a horrible black car, very big, and it came, oh! so fast along that white road, and mummy and I could do nothing, only hold each other very tight. And then I can't remember any more, till I was standing there in the dust, and mummy lay all white and still, and Monsieur came and helped us."

"But the man with the black car? Surely he helped you? What was he like?" At the mention of that black car, Rosa had drawn in her breath sharply, and now she spoke fast and eagerly.

"He didn't help us—no—he drove away as soon as he could, and we never saw him again. He was very tall, and his face was dark, and—and horrid," the child shivered; "when he looked at me he made me afraid."

"At one time she played a part in my life—I do not know for certain if she died." Like an undercurrent the words ran in Rosa's brain, the deep voice

of the man who had uttered them seemed to mingle with little Sylvia's clear treble. "She played a part in my life." Could it be that the woman who played that part was the same woman of whom Sylvia spoke—Sylvia's mother?

The excitement of the chase was hot upon her; by skilful question, and sympathetic utterance, she drew from the child an account of her mother's last hours, of the scene by the bedside, of Sir Giles' comforting help.

"And you had nobody else to take care of you?" Rosa asked, when Sylvia paused.

"Nobody, only Monsieur."

"But you must have relations somewhere? Or friends? You and your mother cannot have been alone in the world. Did your father die long before your mother?" The question was very gently asked, and Sylvia put her head against the girl's shoulder with a little sigh.

"I don't believe I've got any relations, but I've got friends. I've got Monsieur, and Miss Helen, and now there's you. But mummy and I didn't seem to have anybody of our own. And I think," she hesitated, "I think my father wasn't very kind to mummy, because she cried, oh, so dreadfully, when I asked about him, and she said I wasn't ever to speak of him any more. So I never did, and I don't know when he died."

"Poor little Sylvia!" Again compassion for a moment smote Rosa, and again she thrust it aside, determined to make her victory complete.

"But, darling, surely your mother left you something of hers that would identify her and you, that would help old friends to know you both? Had she no pretty brooches or bracelets? Nothing that you have got now?"

"I've got two gold brooches that were mummy's," Sylvia said, "and a little locket with my hair in it when I was a baby, that's all, unless you count the wonderful jewel."

Rosa's heart gave a quick leap, but her voice was very composed, as she answered—

"What do you mean by the wonderful jewel?"

"That was my fairy name for it. Mummy and me we often had fairy names for things, and this thing was like something out of a fairy story. Mummy always kept it most awful carefully, because she said it was my inheritance, and she gave it to Monsieur before she died. It was in an ivory box."

"How much I should like to see it," Rosa exclaimed, "I like wonder jewels. They are different, and much nicer than ordinary every-day ones."

"Oh! it's quite different from ordinary ones," the child said simply; "it's big, and there's a great emerald in the middle." Rosa nearly jumped, but controlled herself.

"I'd like to show it you, but Monsieur said it was too expensive to keep in the house, so it lives at the bank."

"Monsieur is very wise," Rosa's voice had in it a note of sarcasm. "Wonder jewels are best locked safely away. One never knows when there may be thieves about, and this jewel must be worth stealing."

"Monsieur says if it was sold there would be a lot of money for it, ever such a heap, so that I would be quite rich. But he won't sell it till I am grown up, and can make up my mind for myself whether to sell it or keep it." The child spoke with old-fashioned quaintness. "I expect I'll like to sell it, and be rich enough to give Monsieur some of the money. You see I love him better than anybody else in the world, and I want to give him more than half my money. I should like to give you some too, and Miss Helen, when I sell the wonder jewel."

"The jewel is probably real, and not faked at all, as the good Hermann tried to make out," Rosa thought. "My surmises have all come true, and this child is undoubtedly the child of the youngest Stansdale sister. Now the question is, what shall I do about it?"

For a long time that evening Rosa Müller's good and bad angel fought with one another, and it was the bad angel who after that long, long fight, gained

the victory. As Rosa waited for her train at the little station next day, she despatched a telegram to London which ran as follows:

"To Hermann Müller,—Object you wanted located. It is in the bank, but is property of Sylvia Burnett, ward of Sir Giles Tredman. Her mother is dead.—Rosa."

CHAPTER XIII.

"I SHALL DO WHAT I LIKE WITH HER NOW."

"To a man of the world like myself, the mystery is, why you ever engaged yourself to that boy? Compared to you, Giles Tredman is a boy. Can you deny it?"

"I am not trying to deny it. Still, the fact remains that I am engaged to him, and intend to marry him in five weeks from now."

"It is so certain as that?" Hermann Müller stooped forward in the big armchair he occupied, and his hand, as though inadvertently, touched Grace's hand that lay in her lap. She coloured vividly, and drew her hand away, but her tone was less assured as she answered—

"Yes, as certain as that. I am arranging about my trousseau now."

"Ah! your trousseau?" The man's dark eyes ran over her with an appraising stare. "I have always been considered a good judge of

ladies' gowns. Perhaps I could offer you some suggestions."

They were seated in Mrs. Cardew's drawing-room on this June afternoon, Grace leaning back upon the couch in what she knew to be her most fascinating pose, and wearing a frock of some pale blue gauzy material which clung about her figure in graceful diaphanous folds, its colour enhancing the brightness of her eyes, and emphasising the delicate loveliness of her complexion. Müller sat near her, his dark head thrown back against a crimson cushion, his eyes drinking in the superb beauty of the woman, a little smile hovering over his lips, a smile that held in it something of mocking triumph, something of amused cynicism. This man did not know the world, and above all, the world of women, for nothing. With a woman of Grace's type, he could calculate to a nicety just how far he could carry easy familiarity into an insolence that bordered on brutality; just how much flattery was needed before the bird fluttered into the snare.

"I am usually considered an adept about gowns myself," Grace answered, with her rather hard laugh, but from under her eyelashes she shot a glance at her companion that somewhat belied her laugh. "You can't say I am not becomingly gowned now," and she drew herself upright, and looked full at him, a daring challenge in her every look and movement.

"You are superb," he replied lazily, his eyes again appraising her, from the crown of her bright hair to the tips of her dainty shoes, "as I am trying to point out to you, far too superb to throw yourself away on a soldier, and country squire. Why did you agree to do it?"

He suddenly dropped his masterful, somewhat brutal tone, and bent towards her again, this time putting his hand firmly over hers, and keeping it there.

"That is my affair," she said, but her voice was not quite under control, and her eyes no longer met his with their daring challenge.

"You are not going to pretend to me that you care for him?" Müller's voice dropped into caressing accents, his hand pressed the hand that lay beneath it; "you won't try to make me believe you are in love with that boy."

Whether because of the pressure of his hand, or because of the sudden tenderness in his voice, Grace could herself scarcely have told, but something impelled her to look straight into his face, and a slow smile crept round her mouth, as she met his significant glance.

"I—don't think I believe in being in love," she said, "hearts are doubtful blessings."

"But about a title, and a big place in the country, there can be no doubt whatever? No, I agree with

you," and Müller, having uttered his insolent remark, leant back in his chair again, and eyed her flushed face with a smile more mocking than before.

"You are not the kind of woman to be satisfied with the worshipful adoration of a boy," Müller went on, before she could speak; "you need a man who is your master, as well as your slave."

"Do I?" she exclaimed fiercely, rising to her feet, and looking down at him with exactly the gesture of indignant pride which he had meant to draw forth, "do I? A man who is my master, indeed? I should like to find the man who could master *me!*"

"You would not have a very prolonged search." Müller dragged himself up from his chair with a well-feigned semblance of indifference, verging on boredom. "I want you, and I mean to have what I want, and the sooner you put an end to the farce of your engagement to Sir Giles, the better."

In a lightning flash memory brought back to her the chivalrous courtliness of Giles' wooing, but something in the utter brutality of the big, dark man who towered over her, made an appeal to the ingrained coarseness that underlay her delicate beauty. And though she drew away from Müller, and laughed scornfully, a thrill ran along her pulses, and a sense of exhilaration stirred within her.

"The wedding day is fixed, the trousseau ordered, you are talking nonsense," she said.

"You can ante-date your wedding, your trousseau will do as well for one bridegroom as for another," he answered quickly. "Go on buying it, I have no objection to that. Fool Sir Giles to the top of your bent. The more you fool him the better pleased I shall be,"—a savage note made itself audible in his voice—"I owe him a grudge. If I can pay part of it through you, so much the better."

"What is the grudge?"

"Never mind just now. All you need remember is, that I want Giles Tredman to taste a handful of dust and ashes: if yours is the hand that gives them, so much the better."

"But——" she began, when he interrupted her sharply.

"Listen to me," he said, seizing her hands in a grasp that hurt her, and compelling her to meet his gaze. "I know you through and through. I am not a chivalrous ass, like your prospective bridegroom. I have no delusions about women of your type. There are good women in the world, yes! I am ready to admit it, but you don't happen to be one of them. But you do happen to suit me, and though I am not going to fall down at your feet and tell you you are an angel, I can give you the sort of life you will like."

"But——" she began again, trying to wrench her hands from his, only to be gripped yet more firmly

in his iron grasp, whilst he went on speaking, as though her voice had not reached his ears.

"You are marrying this Tredman because he is rich, because you want to be 'my lady,' because you think you will get a pleasant rise in the social scale. If you do as I wish, you will be a million times richer than you dream, and you will be able to call yourself—princess! Will that appeal to your ambition?"

"I don't understand," she said, "you are Herr Müller, how——"

"It suits me to pass here as Herr Müller. My own name and title are something quite different. My wife will call herself princess; I am rich now, and if everything works itself out as I mean that it shall, my wealth will be increased by—well, by a very large amount. And"—he paused, his hands loosed her hands, and laid themselves heavily on her shoulders, "and you are the woman I want for my wife."

"You take too much for granted," she said indignantly, trying in vain to draw away from his clasp. "I am bound to another man. How dare you——"

"How dare I?" he laughed, a low, masterful laugh. "How dare I do this—and this?" He stooped and kissed her passionately. "How dare I? Because I am your master, my fair lady, and you know it, and—you like it." And before she could utter a syllable of protest, he had seized her

in his arms and was kissing her again, with a violence that half frightened her, half thrilled her. She was powerless in the grip of his brute strength, and when presently he let her go, she was panting and breathless. But his face was alight with triumph.

"You and I together will have the world at our feet," he said; "we will settle Tredman's part of the business with the least possible worry to ourselves and with the greatest possible humiliation to him," he laughed cynically. "You have only got to do as I tell you. I will manage the rest. Now kiss me again, and I must go."

For a moment—a long, long moment—Grace looked defiantly into his eyes, her head held high. Then suddenly, as if at the call of something more imperious, stronger than any force she had ever known, she flung her arms about his neck with the abandonment of an untamed animal, and pressed her lips to his.

"I shall do what I like with her now," he reflected, as he walked slowly homewards; "she will hold her tongue about everything until I tell her to speak: she will be a lamb in my hands. She is precisely the woman I want, from every conceivable point of view. And the chance of getting even with Tredman adds savour to the whole affair. If only Rosa doesn't bungle things, I may be able to make him pay in

more ways than one. And if only I knew for certain that the other—is dead."

A telegram lay awaiting him on his bureau, and as he read on the pink paper the words, signed Rosa, he smiled sardonically.

"Fortune is in a good mood just now," he said, "she heaps her favours on me with a lavish hand. This Tredman will have to pay heavily for all he has done, more heavily than he will like, but not too heavily to please me. I shall get even with him at last, in more ways than one."

CHAPTER XIV.

"WHERE IS SYLVIA?"

GILES TREDMAN sat writing in the library, his table littered with papers having reference to the estate, and to the business connected with his approaching marriage. A draft of his marriage settlement lay at his elbow, and he smiled as his eyes rested upon it. It was so good, so very good, to think that in a few short weeks his beautiful Grace would have become his till death should part them. Many times during the course of his writing he lifted his head, and allowing his eyes to wander round the library, let his thoughts wander, too, in blissful dreams of all the future held for him. He saw visions of Grace in every room of his dearly-loved home, saw her receiving guests in the stately drawing-room, sitting at the head of his table in the dining-room, helping him here in the library, interesting herself in all the details of the estate, sharing his every thought and wish and ambition. Round the woman he loved he

had built up all his ideals of womanhood, and to him Grace was the embodiment of everything that was most lovable and lovely in womankind. He was sure that behind her beautiful face lay a correspondingly beautiful soul, and all her apparent coldness he regarded as exquisite reticence and modesty. In his eyes she came as near to perfection as it was possible for human being to reach, and the bare idea that there could be a flaw in his idol would have seemed to him almost sacrilegious. Even her cool reception of little Sylvia had not shaken his belief in the woman he loved. She was unused to children, he told himself, it was perhaps only natural that she should be a little jealous of someone who seemed to be usurping part of his affections; jealousy, after all, might and often did belong to a great love. Thus he excused her, but never, for a single instant, would he have allowed that any shadow marred the loveliness of her soul as he had created its image in his heart. It was with a sigh that he presently thrust away his day dreams, and drew a batch of papers towards him, determining to concentrate his whole mind on business for the rest of the afternoon, and not allow himself to think of Grace again until he strolled round the garden with Sylvia after tea. That he and Sylvia should visit the greenhouses, inspect the vegetables, and watch the roses break into flower, had now become a daily custom; and the

child's quaint questions and dainty fancies not only amused and interested her guardian, they also seemed to endear her to him more and more with every passing day.

"She is such a loving little soul, and her thoughts are as pretty and as sweet as her dear little face," the reflection passed through his mind, as he resolved to concentrate himself on the business in hand, and at that very moment the door of the library was hurriedly opened, and Miss Helen entered the room. She looked pale and flurried; there was a startled expression in her eyes, and she glanced round the big room with quick, nervous gestures.

"Is Sylvia with you?" she said, making no apology for her hasty entrance, "have you seen Sylvia lately?"

"Seen Sylvia? Why, no," Giles looked at the little lady in surprise; "why do you come to ask me about Sylvia?"

"Because I can't find her anywhere." Miss Helen was breathless, and panting with excitement. "We generally sit in the garden at this time of day, because it is nice and cool down by the stream. I read to her and she works. She went out there soon after lunch, and took her needlework and her dolls, and I was to join her later when I had finished my letters. But—she is not there—oh! Sir Giles, she

is not there!" Miss Helen's excitement bewildered her employer.

"But why are you so upset about it?" he asked kindly. "She is probably playing somewhere else in the garden. After all, there was no law restricting her to the one place, was there?"

"No, no, of course not, but oh! Sir Giles, I haven't made you understand. I would not have come to trouble you if it had only been that I could not find Sylvia just in that one place, in the summer house by the stream. But we can't find her anywhere." Miss Helen's voice grew tremulous, her frightened eyes, dim with tears, suddenly gave Giles a sense of foreboding. He pushed back his chair and rose, exclaiming—

"What do you mean, Miss Stansdale? Sylvia must be somewhere in the house or garden; and even if she had gone into the park or lane there is no harm in that. She is perfectly safe."

"I said that to myself at first, but now I am frightened. I don't know why, but I am frightened." Giles began by laughing her fears to scorn with kindly amusement, declaring that she must have been reading penny novelettes, and imbibing sensational melodrama. But when he himself had searched house and garden, from end to end, when the servants and stable hands, despatched in all directions, came back with no tidings of the missing

child, his own face grew very grave and anxious. He and Miss Helen had gone first to the place where she and her charge had planned to spend the afternoon, a summer-house on the edge of a stream which ran between the garden and park. It was an ideal spot for a summer's day, the soft ripple of the water, the gentle rustling of the trees that hung above it, making contrasts of coolness and freshness with the heat that shimmered over the meadows, where red sorrel and ox-eye daisies grew amongst the flowering grasses. Forget-me-nots dipped blue heads into the clear water; yellow irises stood in stately clumps against the bank; and the fragrance of meadow sweet hung upon the warm air. In garden and meadow birds were chirping and twittering, but in the summer-house there was a silence which struck a chill to the hearts of the man and woman, who stood silently looking round it. Upon the table in the centre lay the book which Miss Helen had been intending to read to Sylvia; seated stiffly on the seat with limply hanging arms and legs was a row of dolls, all Sylvia's cherished darlings, who shared with her her pleasures and griefs. Beside them lay one of Sylvia's gloves, and Miss Helen picked it up with a little sob.

"You see, the dear child remembered to bring her gloves. I told her to be sure not to forget them, because she wanted to do some gardening after tea. We planned to have tea out here; it is such a treat

for Sylvia, she feels it is like a kind of picnic, and now she is not here to enjoy it." Miss Helen's voice broke in a sob, and sitting down beside the forlorn row of dolls, she began to cry in a pathetic, helpless way that went to Giles' heart.

"Come, come, Miss Stansdale," he said, laying a hand on her shoulder, "don't give way like this. After all, Sylvia has probably strayed off into the woods and forgotten the time. There must be some quite simple explanation of her disappearance. Children are not kidnapped by gipsies nowadays, and all the people round know Sylvia quite well."

"Yes, and they adore her," sobbed Miss Helen, wiping her eyes with a crumpled wet handkerchief, and looking round the empty summer-house with a shiver; "everybody loves the dear child. She has such sweet ways. She is so full of sympathy and love for the whole world. Poor old Granny Partridge in the almshouses said to me only yesterday—'He'll be a lucky man who wins that little lady, when she's old enough to be wooed and won.'"

In spite of his anxiety Giles laughed a little.

"Early days, isn't it, to be thinking of our little Sylvia getting wooed and married and a'—but, if she goes on as she has begun, Granny Partridge is right. One of these days she will make a sweet wife for some lucky fellow, and I shall have to give the little girl away."

"But where is she now?" Miss Helen said, springing to her feet. "I daresay you think it is silly of me to make such a fuss, but I have a kind of feeling that she has not just strayed into the woods. Besides which, why should she stray away? She has never done such a thing before. It frightens me that she has gone like this. It really frightens me." Again Sir Giles used his best endeavours to comfort and calm the distressed little woman; but when afternoon drifted into evening, and evening sank into night, and still no trace of Sylvia could be discovered, his own anxiety grew intense. The child had vanished with a completeness that was both startling and alarming. If the earth beside the summer house had opened and swallowed her up, she could not have disappeared in a more disconcerting way; and enquiries in every direction failed to elicit the slightest atom of information about her. One of the gardeners had seen her walking towards the summer-house, her dolls in her arms; a stable boy had noticed her picking some roses in the garden a little later in the afternoon than the hour when the gardener remembered seeing her. But from the moment when the boy had seen her amongst the roses, she and her bunch of gathered blossoms had vanished, leaving no sign. All night long parties of villagers were scouring the park, the lanes, the common, the woods for miles around, but when the

various parties returned to the Court the next morning, they could only tell a haggard and weary-looking Sir Giles that their efforts had been quite fruitless. Sylvia was lost, and there did not appear to be the smallest clue by which she could be found. Giles himself had been to Birdsbrook, and had even interviewed the station-master of the little station, with a forlorn idea that the child might have been carried off and taken away by train. But both station-master and porter solemnly declared that no one in the least resembling Sylvia had travelled by train, either on the previous afternoon or during the night; and a very distracted Sir Giles and Miss Helen faced one another across the breakfast table.

"What can have happened to her?" Giles asked his companion for the thousandth time. "And what can have become of her?" Miss Helen echoed.

If anybody had done her any harm, what reason was there for harming her? To the two who loved her it appeared so meaningless, so bewildering, so impossible of explanation, that the day which followed was like one long nightmare. Miss Helen was half beside herself with grief and suspense; Sir Giles went about with a face so white and worn, and with a look of such set misery in his eyes, that he seemed to have aged by ten years.

"The suspense is so unbearable," he said to Miss

Helen more than once during the course of that interminable day, "if one only knew the child had come to no harm, if one only knew she was safe *somewhere*, it would be less hard to bear. As things are, it is almost intolerable. And it is all so incomprehensible, one sees no light upon it."

But next morning's post threw a light upon it, though, as Giles remarked, it was a light that did not clear up the obscurity at all, but only made the darkness darker. He received a letter, bearing the West Central postmark, and typewritten. It was brief, and very much to the point.

"Sylvia will be sent back to you, if the jewel—called by her the wonder jewel—is given back to its rightful owner. It was stolen by Sylvia's mother. If you are willing to restore it, insert an advertisement to that effect on the front page of the *Morning Post*, heading it 'Sylvia.'"

The effusion was shown by Giles to the local police, and also to a detective from Scotland Yard, whose aid he had sought; and both authorities strongly urged him to temporise, to insert an advertisement and await the result. To the Scotland Yard official, an intelligent individual named Stokes, Giles told the whole story of his first meeting with Sylvia and her mother, and of the ivory box and its precious contents which Mrs. Burnett had given him on her deathbed. "She insisted most strongly that the

jewel was the child's property," he wound up by saying, "and I have always supposed that she must have alluded to Sylvia's father, when she implored me to keep the little girl out of some man's hands. I gathered that this man, whoever he was, was someone to be feared and avoided, and that both the child and the jewel were to be kept from him at all costs. It is obvious that someone traced Sylvia here, and now means to blackmail me. I would ignore this letter if I only knew the child was not in any danger or difficulty."

"Whoever wrote you that letter isn't going to let you know anything about the little lady," Stokes said shrewdly. "He will want to keep you on tenterhooks as much as ever he can, till he sees what chance he has got of getting that jewel."

"Which he certainly won't get, whoever he may be," Giles said sternly; "the jewel is Sylvia's, practically her whole inheritance. I have no intention of parting with it."

"The writer of the letter will next threaten the child's life," the detective answered. "An unscrupulous person, such as this one must be, sticks at nothing. And if, by any chance, he has got his knife into you, he means to do his utmost to hurt you, come what may."

"I have no notion why anybody should, as you say, have his knife into me," Giles answered in

puzzled tones. "As far as I know, I have not an enemy in the world. I adopted the little girl we have lost because she seemed to be entirely alone, thrown on her own resources. I had no means of tracing any relations or friends; she did not appear to possess any. And who, or what, the writer of this letter can be, I cannot imagine."

"What about the little lady's father?" asked the detective. "Was her mother a widow when you met her? Or was there a husband somewhere in the background?"

Giles shook his head.

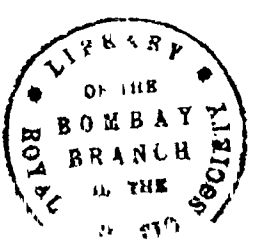
"I don't know, I never knew," he answered. "The poor mother died without really telling me anything about herself or the child, and I could find nothing amongst her things to give any clue to her identity.—The whole thing is mysterious, and the way in which somebody has suddenly discovered that I have charge of Sylvia and her jewel is not the least mysterious part of the whole affair."

Acting on the advice given him, Giles inserted the following advertisement in the *Morning Post*.

"SYLVIA.—Willing to negotiate about the wonder jewel. Give further details.—Giles." And the day after the insertion appeared, another typewritten letter reached him by post.

"DEAR SIR," it ran,—"The wonder jewel to which you refer, is my property, stolen from me by the

lady known to you as Sylvia Burnett's mother. I have no desire or intention of meeting you face to face. I should therefore be glad if you would post the jewel to me by registered packet. Please address it to Mr. Smith, c/o Mr. J. Cox, Stationer, 155, Redman Street, Chelsea, S.W. Unless the jewel is in the gentleman's hands by Monday next at latest, Sylvia will be sent to join her mother. You are dealing with an unscrupulous and desperate man."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CHAPTER XV.

ROSA'S CONSCIENCE.

"AND poor Helen writes in a state of utter distraction. She is beside herself with misery, and she says Sir Giles is nearly as bad. I can't bear to think of it. That dear, pretty little child."

"I don't quite understand," Rosa Müller looked across the Stansdales' drawing-room at her hostess, whose incoherences were difficult to follow; "surely nothing has happened to Sylvia."

"That is just it," Miss Stansdale burst forth. "Helen says she could not bear to write at first, but now she feels she must tell me all about it. Sylvia has disappeared, been kidnapped, and——"

"*Kidnapped?*" Rosa was on her feet and by Miss Stansdale's side, staring down at her with incredulous eyes.

"Yes. Some dreadful person has taken her away, they don't know how, they can't think how, Helen

says. But, whoever the dreadful wicked villain is, he has written to Sir Giles to say the child will be killed if some jewel is not sent to him. It sounds too horrible to be true, and Helen says Sir Giles declares the man is only bluffing, and won't really hurt the child——"

"But he *will!*" the words broke impetuously, unthinkingly, from Rosa's lips, "he——"

"Why do you say that?" Miss Stansdale asked, all incoherency crystallised into amazement. "How do you know anything about this dreadful creature?"

"I don't—I mean—the sort of unscrupulous man you are describing would stick at nothing."

"That is what Helen thinks." Unobservant Miss Stansdale took no notice of Rosa's overmastering embarrassment. "She says she wishes Sir Giles would send the wretch the jewel, and have done with it. She cannot bear to think Sylvia's life may be risked, but Sir Giles is sure the police will catch the man who is blackmailing him, and that Sylvia is perfectly safe."

"*Safe!*" again impulse drove the word from Rosa's lips. "Tell me more, tell me something more about it all. When did the child disappear? Has it only just happened?" With a great fumbling for, and adjusting of, her glasses, Miss Stansdale slowly re-read her sister's letter, which had reached

her by the second post, and Rosa stood listening to the slowly uttered words with a look of acute tension on her face, her hands tightly locked together.

"There, you see what Helen says," Miss Stansdale said, as she folded the letter again. "Sylvia disappeared last Thursday, to-day is Thursday, and if the jewel is not sent by Monday, the little child will be——"

"No, no, don't say it," Rosa exclaimed vehemently, moving about the room in a state of nervous irritation that would not be suppressed, "nothing must hurt her. I never cared for any child before. But that child was so sweet, so dear, and she kissed me." There was such a ring of anguish in the last words, that it penetrated even to Miss Stansdale's usually dense mind, and she glanced curiously at the girl.

"My dear, there is nothing strange in her kissing you," she said, "you are a very attractive woman. You would easily win a child's heart, win any heart in fact. I——"

"Oh! yes, I won the child's heart." Rosa all at once wrung her hands in a paroxysm of pain. "She talked out all her loving little soul to me, but—I never thought of this, my God! I never thought of this."

Her vehemence frightened her companion.

"Of course you could not be expected to think of such dreadful things as these," she said. "Who would ever dream that a little innocent child would be kidnapped for the sake of a jewel? And that then——" Miss Stansdale broke off with a shudder, and Rosa also shivered, though the July day was hot and heavy, and the stillness of the air seemed to presage a thunderstorm.

"Something must be done," she whispered. "I must do something, if only I knew what," then turning to Miss Stansdale, she said aloud and abruptly—

"What you have just told me has upset me. I—I must go to my room and think it over. I can't bear it, I must do something," and with these disjointed sentences, which left Miss Stansdale more hopelessly bewildered than before, she hurriedly left the drawing-room, and went upstairs to her own bedroom with breathless haste.

"I never thought of this," she said, over and over again, pacing the floor restlessly. "I knew he wanted the jewel, and I thought there would be no harm in telling him where it was. But, if he hurts the child, I shall go mad. I could not bear such a crime upon my soul." She leant her head against the window frame, and her eyes wandered out over the trim little garden, where, in the July sunlight, the geraniums blazed in scarlet splendour; and back to

her memory came the thought of the afternoon, a few weeks earlier, when she and Sylvia had sat on the seat under the acacia, and the child had said in her soft clear voice—

"I do like you."

"I do like you." Sylvia had said those words more than once to her, looking at her with loving adoration in her great dark eyes; and now, through her instrumentality, Sylvia was in danger, in how real and genuine a danger she knew only too well.

"And it is all my fault," the girl moaned. "I have been that fiend's tool for so long that I could not shake myself free from him, even when he was scheming against a little child. But I never dreamt he would do this. I never dreamt he would hurt her. Oh! God, show me what to do to save her, for I never dreamt of this."

Almost as if in answer to her prayer—a swift and immediate answer—a man's face rose before her mental vision, a quiet strong face, whose grey eyes had had power to stir her pulses as no other man's eyes had ever done—Hugh Berners. If she could bring herself to tell him the truth, perhaps he would be able to help her, perhaps his brain would devise some means by which Hermann could be circumvented. She would appeal to Dr. Berners. And yet, how could she? Ah! how could she? She

drew back from the window, and once more began to pace the room, turning over and over again in her mind the new thought that had come to her. It was useless to go for help to Hugh Berners, unless she told him the truth; and how could she tell him the truth, when she knew it would make him despise her utterly, and for evermore? He would never again look at her with those kind, admiring eyes, if she told him the sordid story, which she must tell him if she went to him for help. He would cast her out of his heart, out of his life. He was not the kind of man who would go on caring for a woman he could neither respect nor honour, and she had learnt to care for him. Slowly that thought emerged from the chaos of her reflections, and standing before her looking-glass she gazed into her own eyes, the colour slowly mounting to her face. Yes! Why should she hide from herself what she knew to be the truth. Hugh Berners' grey eyes had awakened within her something which she had imagined no man would ever awaken: Hugh Berners' simple, chivalrous nature had set vibrating in her soul chords which even she herself had hardly known existed. She was aware that the ball was at her feet. If she chose she could stretch out her hand and take the wonderful gift which could be hers; it was within her own power to reverse the unfavourable impression which her flippancy the other day had made upon Hugh.

She could at any moment call him back to her side. But, if she went to him with the story of Sylvia, if she made clear to him the part she had played in that story, if she showed him a glimpse, and more than a glimpse, of her life of adventure and sordid intrigue, he would shake himself free from her for ever.

"He has made me want to be a different woman," she said wistfully, turning away from the glass, and beginning to pace the room again. "I used not to care how I got my ends, as long as I reached them. Now, the crookedness of it all seems hateful. Hermann has been my bad angel, always my bad angel; and he has led me on from helping the Holy Cause for which my mother died, to helping him with other and lesser things. I have sunk to his level, when I might have risen to the level of a man like Hugh Berners." Her restless pacing had brought her back to the window, and once more she stood looking out over the flaming geraniums and the acacia-tree to the arch of blue sky beyond it.

"And what prevents you from still rising to his level," some inward voice seemed to say. "You have it in your own hands to fight against your old bad influences. It lies with yourself whether you climb to the plane on which Hugh Berners stands, or to stay always on those lower levels with such souls as

Hermann Müller and his kind. It is in your own hands."

In her own hands? The inward voice made itself so clearly heard, that it was almost as if the words had been actually uttered.

In—her—own hands—to choose between good and evil: to rise to the level of the man she loved—yes, she owned that to her own heart without false shame,—the man she loved; or to sink lower, and lower yet, into depths which her new self was ashamed to contemplate.

"I've got to decide now, this minute," she exclaimed, "the turning point has come. If I go to Dr. Berners and tell him the truth, Hermann will be my enemy. I shall never work for him again, even in a good cause. And I shall be stranded,—alone, without a friend. And, if I don't go, Hermann is capable of making away with little Sylvia for the sake of hurting Sir Giles. His threats are no empty ones. What he says he will do, he means to do, as I ought to know," and a long shiver shook her from head to foot. "And—if I make him my enemy,—he will try to hunt me down, as he had hunted others down before." Again she shivered, but in spite of the terror that shook her, in spite of the fear that had dawned in her eyes, there was a look of strange resolve upon her face. Her lips closed firmly in a determined line: some new strength, some

nobler purpose, showed itself in her expression, and in that moment the victory of goodness was won.

* * * * *

Dr. Berners was at home to receive patients every day between two and three, and on this July afternoon he had drawn his writing table close to the window which opened directly into his pretty garden. It was a garden as far removed from the trim suburban pattern of the Stansdales' garden as could be well imagined. Down the centre of the little lawn ran a pergola covered with roses in every variety of colour, from the most vivid crimson to the purest white, a tangle of loveliness and fragrance, which would alone have marked what he called his "patch," as something very unlike its neighbours. On either side of the rose-covered pergola ran a strip of grass, upon which were small beds of flowers, dwarf roses, dainty and sweet; glowing masses of pansies, lifting purple and bronze and golden faces to the sunshine; flaming snapdragons, and carnations, crimson, lemon-coloured and palest pink. And, separated from them by the gravel path were broad beds, in which tall white lilies and stately larkspurs made a background for sweet williams—velvety and soft—mignonette, white pinks, and love in the mist, dim blue amongst its grey-green leaves.

Hugh frequently lifted his eyes from the paper he was writing for a medical journal, to let them wander over the loveliness of his cherished flowers; and as the warm languorous fragrance of the blossoms stole into the room, he found that his thoughts were often distracted from the details of an interesting typhoid case, to the disturbing remembrance of a woman's eyes, a woman's witching smile. He was angry with himself for allowing his thoughts to be distracted; still angrier that he could allow his mind to linger round the memory of a woman who had shown hardness and flippancy on subjects which he regarded as sacred. And yet his thoughts returned again and again to Rosa Müller; Rosa as he had first seen her in the Cardews' drawing-room, gowned in some rich deep blue, that gave exactly the right note of contrast with her fair colouring; Rosa, as Miss Stansdale's guest, dressed in the white garments that gave her so youthful an appearance, and seemed to him to add to her charm. For the fiftieth time he forced his eyes away from the garden, and his thoughts away from Rosa, when his parlour-maid opened the door, and announced that a lady wished to see him.

"Show her in," he answered, expecting to be confronted by an elderly lady patient who was due to visit him to-day, and pushing his papers aside with a little sigh as he remembered her loquacity. But

when the door opened and shut again, and he rose to his feet to greet his visitor, an exclamation of surprise broke from his lips, for the lady who entered was not the middle-aged spinster he was expecting, but the subject of his late meditations—Rosa Müller. She stood only just inside the door, an unusual look of embarrassment and hesitation on her face, her colour coming and going swiftly, something of shrinking fear in her eyes, and Hugh went quickly towards her.

"You?" he said, with no more conventional greeting, "I did not expect to see you."

"I came—I had to come," she stammered, her manner more like that of a young and frightened girl than a poised woman of the world. "I want to say something to you, to tell you something." Her eyes did not meet his, she was obviously very ill at ease, but her very nervousness, and the girlish embarrassment of her manner, roused in Hugh all the tenderness which her flippancy had temporarily checked. With the chivalry of a man who had always reverenced woman, his chief instinct was to set her at her ease, and he drew forward a chair for her, and said quietly—

"Sit down, Miss Müller, and tell me what I can do for you. Is there any way in which I can help you?"

"Yes," she twisted her hands together nervously.

"I came to you, because I didn't know what else to do. I think you will help."

"I am sure I will help, if there is anything to be done for you," he answered cheerily, still only intent on helping her to overcome her embarrassment. "Tell me all about it, and let us see what we can do."

"It isn't the sort of thing you expect," she exclaimed, hurriedly and confusedly. "I mean, it is something very out of the common. You will despise me when I tell you, but, I've got to tell you, I've just got to tell you the truth." She spoke with suppressed vehemence, her hands still working restlessly, her eyes averted from his face, and he, seeing that she was labouring under some great emotion, sat down in his place by the table, and said very quietly—

"Try to tell me just exactly what it is you want, and don't jump to the conclusion that I shall despise you. That is a most unlikely contingency," and he smiled, the smile which had begun to seem to Rosa the sweetest and kindliest in the world.

"You will certainly despise me," she answered, a note of despair in her tones, "but I can't help that. I have got to tell you everything now. I can't pretend to you any more. You must know the whole truth."

"The truth about what?" he said, a puzzled look in his eyes.

"About me—about my life. But first, listen. I came to-day because of little Sylvia Burnett, Sir Giles Tredman's ward."

Hugh looked more and more bewildered, as indeed he felt.

"Sylvia Burnett? The little girl of whom Miss Helen Stansdale takes care? But what have you and I to do with her?"

"She has disappeared," came the hurried response, "and I can tell you where she is, at least I think I can tell you."

"*You* can tell me? But how do you know? And why do you come to me about it?"

"Because you are strong and kind: because to come to you was the quickest way of getting help, and there is not much time to lose. Sylvia is in danger—real danger—and if she is not saved from it soon, she will never be saved at all."

"What you are saying is so much Greek to me," Berners exclaimed. "It all sounds like something out of a melodrama; and I can't in the least understand what you and I have to do with it all."

With a great effort at self-control Rosa clasped her hands tightly and looked into the doctor's puzzled face.

"I will try to tell you," she said. "I will try to make it plain. I was sent here, to Miss Stansdale, by my uncle, my mother's half-brother, Hermann Müller. He calls himself that, it is not his real name, but he is known here by it. He sent me here, to try and find out the whereabouts of a certain jewel."

Berners looked more and more mystified.

"I do not know why he wanted the jewel," she continued. "I do not know what it has to do with him, but he wanted it desperately, and when Hermann Müller wants a thing desperately, he will have it at all costs."

"But why did you come to the Stansdales for it?" Hugh managed to interrupt her stream of words.

"Because he had given the jewel to the youngest Miss Stansdale, the one of whom they never speak," and Rosa briefly recapitulated the story Miss Marion had told her.

"I can only guess that it was for Hermann's sake she left her home and her family; but I discovered beyond a possibility of doubt, that the jewel in question was left to Sylvia Burnett by her mother."

"Then Sylvia's mother was a Miss Stansdale, is that what you mean?"

"I think there is no reasonable doubt about it,"

Rosa answered, "though there are no proofs whatever of the child's identity."

"But still I cannot understand why you blame yourself for anything?"

A burning flush of shame scorched her face.

"Because Miss Marion's chance observation about Sylvia's likeness to her sister gave me the idea of questioning the child. And I—I made Sylvia like me, and then persuaded her to tell me of her mother, and her mother's death, and so by easy stages about the jewel bequeathed to her by her mother. And then—" Rosa paused, her shamed eyes bent down, "then I told Hermann where the jewel was."

"But you say the child has disappeared—why?"

"Because Hermann is trying to force Sir Giles' hand. He threatens to kill little Sylvia unless the jewel is handed over to him."

"But that is mere bluff," Hugh exclaimed indignantly. "The police——"

"The police are not likely to baffle Hermann Müller," she interrupted, with a sort of deadly quietness, "they would not find it easy to trace him if——"

"If you were not putting them on his track," Hugh broke in, looking at her steadily. "Remember, by what you are telling me, you are putting this man into my hands."

"I forgot that," she faltered, "I forgot that," and every trace of colour died out of her face, leaving

it ashen in hue. "When he finds out that I have betrayed him, he will kill me too. Not that I am afraid," she went on, lifting her head a little proudly. "I do not want to shirk the consequences of what I am doing in telling you the truth. I had to tell you, because little Sylvia must be saved."

"You think it is this man you call Hermann, who has taken her away from Sir Giles?"

"I am sure of that, as sure as if I had seen it happen. No one else could have known that the jewel was in Sir Giles' hands, and he only knew because I told him. He has a grudge against Sir Giles, I do not understand why, excepting that Sir Giles seems to have been present when that poor lady, Sylvia's mother, met her death, and I think he hates Sir Giles for having befriended her. But I myself do not understand all which seems mysterious. I only know that Hermann would, if he could, do a bad turn to Sir Giles; that now his chance has come, and he has taken it. And I—" her voice sank—"I have given him the chance."

Her stricken face and shamed eyes, the faltering accents of her voice, made an even more direct appeal than her beauty had done, to all the tenderness in Hugh's nature. He bent towards her, and laid his hand upon hers.

"You made a mistake, you are doing your utmost to repair the mistake. None of us can do more."

"But all my life has been spent in a way you would hate and despise," she exclaimed, the impulse to confess strong upon her. "I will not let you think better of me than I deserve, you shall know the worst of me, the very worst." She dragged her hand away from him, and sprang to her feet, continuing to speak in rapid, nervous accents, without giving him an opportunity of uttering a syllable. "I am a Russian, and my mother worked for Russia—for the Holy Cause she called it—and when I was a child, I worked with her. That was noble work, she was a noble woman. But she died when I was only a little girl; my father had died long before, and I was left to the tender mercies of my mother's half-brother, who now calls himself Hermann Müller. Sometimes he worked for the cause, but at others he worked for his own ends, and I was a useful tool. For a few years I was away from him, at school, perhaps it was then that he knew Sylvia's mother, for I never saw or heard of her. Since I left school, I have been his catspaw, his decoy, the helper in all his schemes for money-getting, for low adventure. Men came to his card parties because I was good to look at, and amusing to talk to. I have been all over Europe with him, and I never understood till now how low I had dropped in lending myself to his base schemes and low frauds."

"What has taught you now?" the words were

almost snapped out at her, the two stood facing one another, it was as though some momentous crisis were at stake. "What has taught you now?" Hugh repeated, when she did not at once reply.

"I cannot tell you that," she answered slowly, the colour that had come back to her face as she talked dying out of it again. "I had to tell you the truth, I could not let you know me any more under false pretences, but—there is nothing else to be said." All the vitality seemed to leave her with the last words, she stood there before him like a flower broken on its stalk, her head drooping, her whole pose one of intense fatigue, and Hugh's grave tone changed.

"There is everything more to be said," he answered very gently, his hands drawing her trembling hands into their grasp. "Do you know what I think of you, for coming and telling me all this?"

She shook her head, and a wan smile flickered across her face, though her eyes brimmed over with tears.

"I think, you are a noble woman, like your mother," he said very softly. "It was not an easy thing to tell me the truth."

"*Easy?*" Her tear-dimmed eyes looked full into his. "I didn't think I could ever do it. I fought against doing it, but something made me come —something—that was stronger than myself." The grasp of his hands upon hers tightened.

"What was it stronger than yourself?" There was a compelling force in his eyes, she could not withdraw her own glance, but the soft colour crept over her face again.

"You!" The one word came under her breath, drawn from her by that irresistible force against which she was powerless to struggle, and as he heard it, Hugh Berners laughed, a low, contented laugh.

"Was I stronger than yourself?" he asked, his voice dropping into a caressing tenderness, that sent a shiver of joy through her veins. "Did you know that I should understand."

"I thought you would never want to speak to me again," she said, a great bewilderment and a great happiness thrilling in her voice. "I fought hard with myself before I came to you, because I was sure that you would despise me utterly when I told you the truth. I thought that by telling you I was cutting myself away from you for ever."

"You thought that, and still you came," his hands drew her imperceptibly nearer to himself.

"I had to come," she repeated. "I could not let you think me better than I am. I had to tell you the worst."

"You care for me enough to want me to know the whole of you, good and bad?" The note of triumph deepened in his voice.

"Yes," she whispered, her eyes falling at last before what she read in his. "I knew I would rather never see you again than be dishonest with you any more. I have never done anything to disgrace my womanhood, only I have lived a life of adventure, of intrigue. I——" But the end of her sentence was muffled by the rough folds of his coat, for he caught her in his arms, and held her closely, raining kisses on her rosy face.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOUND!

"WHAT makes you think she is in this house, even if you find the house for certain?"

"I feel sure of it, I can't explain why, but I feel sure this is the house. Remember, I have been here more than once. He took it as a place in which to concoct his plans. This house is the centre of the web. It was here that he told me to go to the Stansdales. It is here that we had meetings for the business of the Society to which he and I both belong. My memory is very good, and though I have only been here at night, I know the house."

"Do you know I followed you here once?"

Berners and Rosa were walking slowly down a mean street, that same street in which not very long ago he had stood and watched her enter this very house.

"Do you mean to say you were interested in me even then?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"Even then," he answered, his smile telling her more than his words.

It was the morning after their momentous interview in his consulting-room, and he and Rosa had come to London together, to search for little Sylvia, in the place where Rosa was sure she would find her. Yielding to her earnest pleadings, Berners had consented for the present not to put the matter into the hands of the police, but he felt he was acting against his better judgment in making the promise.

"He is my mother's brother," she pleaded, "and in his way he has been good to me, though if he knew what I had done now, he would not scruple to kill me," she added.

"He won't get a chance of doing that," was Hugh's grim response. "You will be my wife immediately, and then I think we can both defy your precious uncle."

"Don't!" she answered with a shudder. He had spoken the words during their journey to London, and she shrank nearer to him as he uttered them. "It frightens me to hear even you defy him. He is so clever, so diabolically clever, and when there is an obstacle in his path, he pushes it away, as you might get rid of an insect. He does not care for God, or

man, or devil—sometimes I think he is more than half devil himself." At the time Hugh had laughed tenderly, but her words recurred to him now, as they stood side by side before the door of the sinister and mean-looking house, in the mean-looking street.

The something sinister in its aspect gave him a sudden feeling of foreboding, of which he tried in vain to shake himself free.

"How do you propose to get into this place?" he asked lightly, hiding his own misgivings under a cloak of simulated cheerfulness.

"The caretaker knows me," she answered, "and Hermann and I had a password. The caretaker will think I am here on his business, as I have been mixed up with so many other of Hermann's projects. There will be no difficulty about my getting in, but you must wait for me outside."

Hugh remonstrated hotly, but to all his remonstrances she made the same reply.

"They will think I am mixed up in the business. Hermann does not know yet that I have been playing the part of Judas, and I should not have done it, except to save little Sylvia. I could not let her be hurt." Seeing that remonstrance was useless, Hugh at last yielded to her representations, and having paced up and down the street whilst their argument

was in progress, they once more paused before the sinister-looking door.

"Don't wait here for me," Rosa said, "go on along the street, as if you had nothing to do with me. Presently I will rejoin you." Very reluctantly her lover moved away, and when he was a few houses distant, Rosa lifted the knocker and knocked three times, soft knocks with a peculiar intonation in each. Hardly had the last knock reverberated through the house, than the door was softly opened, and a man looked cautiously out, but on seeing who it was standing on the step, he opened the door wider, and stood back that the girl might enter.

"Is Mr. Müller here?" she asked carelessly.

"No, miss!" Deacon, the caretaker, looked surprised. "Were you expecting him here to-day? He didn't seem to think he would be back till to-morrow, or Monday?" Rosa had learnt something. Hermann was not there, was possibly not even in town, and in that case her task would be easier, the coast more clear.

"It was uncertain whether he would meet me here to-day or not," she answered superbly. "As he has not been able to come I shall have to do the business for him. The little girl is quite safe. No one has been to enquire for her?" It was a master stroke, a stroke played at a venture, but spoke with such

assurance that the caretaker, a rough man of the people, did not for a moment doubt that all was well.

"She is safe enough," he chuckled, leering at Rosa, "nobody ain't been 'ere askin' after her, and nobody ain't likely to come. This place is safe enough hidin'—you bet your life."

"I am sure of that," Rosa said very quietly, though her heart beat fast. "I shall have to be in the committee-room upstairs for a little while, looking out some papers. I need not disturb you any further."

"Oh! that's all right," the man answered drily. "Very pleased to see you, miss, and if you want anything you've only got to call down the kitchen stairs."

"Thank you!" Rosa's tones were courteous but distant; the jaunty familiarity of this particular type of Englishman jarred on her nerves. "I shall be very busy and not likely to want anything, but you will be there if I do?" she added, fearing lest Deacon should suspect her of wishing to get rid of him. "I will go up now, and begin to work," and with heart still beating fast, she mounted the narrow staircase, and entered the room in which so many of the so-called Müller's schemes were hatched. The table, surrounded by chairs, the dingy paper, the square of cheap carpet, the noisily ticking eight-

day clock, all these were as Rosa had known them ever since her first coming to his room many weeks before; but she herself was different, as she realised acutely, when she stood looking round the bare and dingy place. A new softness, a new gentleness had come to her: the remembrance of the old sordid schemes and intrigues shamed her: something nobler, something higher than herself, had lifted her out of the mire, and given her a longing for a better and nobler life.

"And whatever happens to me, whatever Hermann's vengeance may be, I will do what is right now, please God," she whispered, as she looked once more about the dingy room, and to give a semblance of truth to her story to the caretaker, took some papers from a cupboard, and strewed them on the table. Next moment she was glad that she had done so, for the door was pushed open, and Deacon's repulsive and not over-clean visage peered round it.

"Nothing I can do to help you, miss, I suppose?" he asked, his small eyes wandering inquisitively round the apartment.

"Nothing, thank you," Rosa drew a chair to the table and sat down, beginning in a business-like way to turn over the papers. "I shall not be very long, but there is something I must find here."

"Oh! that's all right, miss," the man repeated his

former phrase, and left the room, shutting the door carefully behind him; and Rosa heard his creaking footsteps go down the stairs. She waited for several minutes after he had departed, then rose softly, and opening the door noiselessly, peeped out into the passage. The house was very still, almost ominously still, it seemed to the listening woman. Two other doors opened on to the little landing on which she stood, and the staircase climbed up again to a floor above. The two remaining rooms on the landing were bedrooms, as she knew, occupied occasionally, either by Hermann himself, or by some of his friends, doubtful beings who did strange things in the name of Liberty, and were to be found in whatever capital of Europe anarchy ran riot. The lower two rooms were used, one for meals, and the other for sleeping accommodation, but it was to the top floor that Rosa, after that instant of intent listening, made her way. It seemed to her that, excepting for the caretaker and his wife in the basement, the house was empty. The dwellers in this sinister place were in the habit of flitting to and fro, here to-day, gone to-morrow; and in any case Rosa felt that her own past association with her uncle's schemes gave her a certain security, even if she met any of his associates. But she climbed the flight of stairs to the top floor unmolested, and here again three shut doors faced her upon the little landing.

On this landing she paused for a second, looking from one door to the other, then, her mind made up, she turned the handle of the one on her right, and entered the slip of a room, which, in spite of the bright summer day outside, was shrouded in semi-darkness.

"Oh! don't come back," a faint little voice wailed out from the far corner by the window. "I will be goöd, indeed, indeed I will be good. I won't cry again, only don't hurt me any more." The piteous voice, broken by a half-suppressed sob, the terror in the accents, the low quivering tones, sent a thrill of indignant horror through Rosa's heart.

"Don't be frightened," she said soothingly, stumbling across the room, and hastily drawing back the heavy curtains. "I have come to help you, don't be afraid."

"Oh!" the piteous little voice exclaimed, passionate relief in its tones. "I was so frightened—they hurt me—I was afraid—" and Rosa, turning towards the corner whence the voice came, saw, crouching on a heap of dirty bedclothes, the form of Sylvia Burnett.

In a moment she was kneeling on the floor by the child's side, her arms wrapped round the quivering little body, her lips pressed against the white, agonised face.

"Oh! it's my pretty lady," the child cried, clinging to her with a desperate, terrified clutch. "I thought God had forgotten about me; I've prayed and prayed, and nobody came, and I've tried to be good." Her pent-up terrors found vent at last, and pressing close against Rosa, she broke into a storm of sobs and tears, all the more terrible because they were so silent.

"Hush! my darling, hush!" Rosa gathered her up as if she had been a baby, and gently stroked back the dusky, tangled hair, "don't cry like that, dear, it is all right now. I have found you. God has sent me to find you, and you are safe. I want you to try and be very quiet, that I may get you out of the house without anybody knowing you have gone."

With a self-control quite remarkable in so young a child, Sylvia choked down her sobs, and looked up into Rosa's face with a very tremulous smile.

"I will be good," she said. "Only—you won't let him hurt me any more?" and once more she clutched desperately at Rosa, her eyes full of fear.

"No one shall hurt you," Rosa whispered. "What have they done to you, you poor little girl?"

"They laughed at me, and when I begged them to let me go, they beat me," she whispered; "they

hurt me, and I was so tired, and so hungry—and oh ! please take me away soon." Seeing that the child was almost beside herself with fear, and only restraining herself by an almost superhuman effort, Rosa helped her to rise, but she was so exhausted that she would have sunk to the ground again, but for her rescuer's supporting arm.

" I can't go fast," she murmured, " I'm so tired, and I think I've got bruises all over me, where he beat me." Stifling the passion of anger that raged within her, Rosa tenderly helped the child down the first flight of stairs, then paused and leant over the banisters, to listen for any sounds from below. But the house was as silent as the grave, and the two advanced, slowly and cautiously, onwards, down the second flight. Here, for an instant, Rosa's heart stood still, for the sound of footsteps became distinctly audible, footsteps coming up from the kitchen below. Quick as lightning, and without a sound, she darted towards the door at the top of the kitchen stairs, pulled it sharply to, and shot the bolt, whilst the steps coming up from below grew more hurried, and in a moment there was a patter of fists upon the door, and Deacon's voice was heard in loud oaths on the other side. There was not a second to be lost. The man had only to turn round, rush through the basement, and catch her at the top of the area steps, and this was evidently

what he proposed to do, for Rosa once more heard steps on the stone stairs, descending swiftly. She flung her arm about Sylvia again, dragged her across the hall, opened the door as quickly as her nervousness would let her, and dashed into the street, more than half carrying the exhausted child. She could hear a great banging of doors and shouting in the basement; Deacon's voice rapping out oaths, his wife's shrill accents chiming in with his loud one, and then the man himself appeared at the door giving upon the area. Rosa looked up and down the street in momentary despair, then the sight of Hugh's figure running towards her gave her a fresh impetus and courage.

"Try to run with me," she said to Sylvia. "Dr. Berners is here, he will help us. You will soon be quite safe." As the words left her lips, another tall form appeared in sight, coming from the opposite direction, and walking with swift, determined strides towards the house. The build of the man was unmistakable, and as he reached Rosa's side, and laid a heavy hand on her shoulder, a great wave of fear flooded her soul, and every trace of colour faded from her face. But her arm still supported the fainting child, and she opened her lips to speak. Hermann Müller forestalled her.

"So—you have betrayed me," he whispered, "and I have caught you in the very act. I shall do nothing

now," his eyes glanced towards Hugh, who was almost upon them, " but—you know what to expect at my hands ? " Then, lifting his hat with exaggerated courtesy, and smiling a smile of fiendish malice, he disappeared into the house, just as Hugh Berners reached Rosa's side.

CHAPTER XVII.

"MY LITTLE COMFORTER."

"As long as I see you, Monsieur, I know I'm quite safe."

Sylvia, curled up in a corner of the library sofa, looked across at Giles with adoring eyes, and he smiled back at her, his heart hot with indignation as he saw the dark shadows under her eyes, the lines of suffering pencilled round the sensitive mouth.

"You are perfectly safe, dear," he answered. "I only wish we had the brute who hurt you equally safe."

"He did frighten me," the child said, with a shudder; "you see, Monsieur, I thought perhaps he would kill me, he looked at me so angrily, and he talked in a dreadful voice that made me think of ogres." At the child's words Sir Giles laughed, but it was a very tender laugh, and he sat down on the wide sofa, and stroked Sylvia's small hands with gentle touch.

"I wish we could get hold of the ruffian," he said, "but when the police got to the house where Miss Müller found you, he had gone. There was evidently some way out at the back; he has vanished."

"He won't ever come back, will he?" she asked, her small trembling form shrinking nearer to her guardian. "I don't believe I could bear it if he ever came back."

"He will never trouble you again, little one, you need not be afraid of that," Giles' voice was more gentle than before, "and after the wedding, you and Miss Stansdale shall go away to a nice seaside place, and you will get some roses back to your cheeks."

"That'll be after a week, won't it?" she questioned.

"A week to-day is our wedding day," he answered, a dreamy look creeping into his eyes, "and whilst Grace and I are in Scotland, you shall paddle and bathe, and build sand castles, and I am sure all the dear dollies will be better for sea air. They will get rosier cheeks than ever." Sylvia laughed, and some of the look of strain left her face. "And then," he went on, "you and Miss Stansdale, and all the dollies will be here ready to greet us when we come home again. And we shall have a lovely time here before we go to India."

"I wish you weren't going to India," she whispered, nestling nearer to him, "it will be very lonely here when you are gone. Only — I don't believe anything will be at all the same when you are married."

"Certainly it won't be the same," he answered, with a joyous laugh. "I shall have the sweetest, most beautiful wife in the world, and you will have the dearest woman to be a mother to you."

Sylvia was silent: she knew instinctively that it would hurt Giles if she expressed what she really felt about Grace Cardew, and with a rare tact, she refrained from speaking.

"And you must make haste and get quite well by our wedding day," Giles continued. "I shouldn't feel my wedding was right if my little girl was not there." Sylvia slipped her hand into his, and the mute action spoke more forcibly than words. It was only the day after her rescue from the house in Graham Street, and she was still very shaken and tired. By her own special request she had been allowed to lie on the couch in the library, because, as she expressed it, she felt safer there, and when Giles was writing, she liked to lie back amongst the cushions, watching his bent, dark head, and absorbed face. He returned to his place at the table after the foregoing conversation. The days of acute

anxiety about Sylvia had been wasted ones as far as business was concerned, and he had considerable arrears of work to get through, before his wedding in the following week. He had only been seated at his writing for a few minutes when Sylvia looked across at him, saying wistfully—

"I'm afraid I won't ever like my dear little summer-house again."

"Will you tell me how it was you went away from it on that day?" Giles asked. He had forborne to put the question until the child herself mentioned the matter, being anxious to avoid a subject which might increase her nervous tension.

"It was a man who came," she answered, with a shiver. "I was there by myself, with just the dolls, and he came in very quickly out of the lane through the hedge; he never said anything, he just laughed, and then he put a big shawl all over me, and I couldn't call out or scream, and he carried me away: and I felt him put me into a motor, and we drove off, oh! so dreadfully quickly. And we just drove on and on till we got to that horrible house where the pretty lady found me. Oh! don't let me have to talk about that house any more."

"You shall never speak of it again," came the

soothing response; "now lie still there and rest, whilst I write, and don't worry that little brain of yours about anything."

So excellently did Sylvia carry out his orders, that when he glanced across at her, he saw she had pillowed her head on her arm and was sound asleep, a smile on her small, white face.

"We must make her look quite well for the wedding," he reflected. "Poor little girl, if I can manage it, she shall enjoy herself to the top of her bent. It will be the greatest day of my life, and it shall be one of the happiest in hers."

Sylvia slept soundly and peacefully until long after tea time, and she was only rousedat last when the butler entered the library, bringing a telegram to his master. Giles took it carelessly enough, telegrams just then wereevery day, ahd all day, occurrences, and it was with a little jest for Sylvia on his lips that he tore open the orange envelope, and unfolded the pink paper within. But as he read the brief message, the loving child eyes watching him saw a change pass over his face, a change so terrible, that she sprang from the sofa, and to his side, with a low exclamation of alarm.

"What is it, oh! Monsieur, what is it?" she said, her two hands clasped round his arm, her eyes fixed

upon his stricken face. "I can't bear it when you look like that." Giles glanced down at her unseeingly. The sound of her voice had reached his ears, but it was evident that the sense of what she said had not penetrated to his mind; the greyness of his cheeks and lips, the look of frozen despair in his eyes terrified the child, and she said again—

"What is it? Oh! please tell me what is it?"

"I—don't know," he answered, and then he threw back his head and laughed, a horrible, mirthless laugh, that aroused in Sylvia a fresh paroxysm of fear. He seemed suddenly to become aware of her frightened face, and perhaps he felt the convulsive clutch of her hands on his arm, for his dreadful laughter ceased all at once, and he put his hands on Sylvia's shoulders almost roughly, holding her a little away from him, and looking deep into her startled eyes.

"It is nothing," he said harshly, "only another man fooled by a woman. Fooled so completely, too—my God!" He broke again into a short, derisive laugh. "I believed in her. I am punished for my credulity. I shall never believe in any woman again."

His grey face set itself into lines of such hardness that the child shrank away from him, releasing

herself from the grip on her shoulders, whilst he dropped back heavily into his chair, staring straight before him with an expression of such concentrated bitterness, that her heart ached unbearably for him.

The telegram lay on the floor at her feet, just where he had dropped it, and Sylvia stooping, picked it up and read the pencilled words—

"*Calais*:—Was married this morning to Prince Damansky—thought it best to avoid unpleasantness, so did not let you know sooner. My mother will return presents and letters.—GRACE."

The cold-blooded heartlessness of this communication was apparent even to a child of eleven, and flinging the pink paper upon the floor again, she flew to Giles' side, and threw her arms round his neck, in a transport of grief and sympathy.

"I hate her!" she exclaimed vehemently. "I hate her—I hate her! Why should she hurt you, when you loved her so?"

"Presumably she found she had made a mistake," he answered, with biting sarcasm. "Women do these things, it is their way. Some day, perhaps, you will hurt a man, and laugh when you see him squirm." He spoke bitterly, but Sylvia did not draw away from

him. On the contrary, she clasped her arms tightly round his neck, and drew his head close against her childish heart, saying softly—

"When I'm a woman I shall love you fifty million times more than I do now, and I wouldn't ever hurt you. Not if it was ever so. I couldn't ever hurt anybody I loved."

"I don't believe you could," he answered, in softened accents. "You are built of the stuff of which the mother women are made, and some day you will bring a man happiness."

"I want to bring you happiness," she answered quaintly, only half understanding the drift of his words, and laying one of her soft hands upon his hair. "I should like to make you happy, Monsieur."

"My little comforter," he said, his voice shaking, some of the bitterness leaving his face, "if anybody could ever bring me happiness again it would be you, little girl, but—" he broke off abruptly, "I think I must be by myself for a bit now, Sylvia,—I—I've got to face things up,—and I've got to face them alone."

* * * * *

It was a nine days' sensation, and for at least that amount of time formed the staple subject of conversation for a large section of London society.

Some gossips declared that Grace Cardew had taken the whole of her world by surprise: others avowed that her growing infatuation for the tall foreigner, who had called himself Hermann Müller, had been too pronounced not to have attracted notice. But one and all blamed her with crushing severity for her treatment of that upright and honourable gentleman, Giles Tredman. To have jilted him at all was sufficiently bad; to have jilted him with such heartless cruelty within a week of their wedding, put her beyond the pale of forgiveness. Mrs. Cardew, to give her her due, was as shocked and horrified by her daughter's conduct as was the rest of the world; and she spoke nothing but the simple truth when she declared that Grace's elopement had come to her as a terrible shock and surprise. Upon her fell all the unpleasantness of returning wedding presents, putting off wedding guests, answering innumerable letters, in fact, bearing the brunt of the humiliation which ought to have fallen upon Grace herself. But Grace had taken excellent care to remove herself as far as possible from her old world and its censorious voice, and after her departure, Mrs. Cardew discovered that she had taken with her all the trousseau which had been provided for her marriage with Giles. It had been very cleverly, very carefully arranged.

Grace had removed her possessions, a few at a

time, packed in cardboard boxes to avert suspicion; and they had remained at the house of a dressmaker friend until Grace packed them all for her journey. One fact the world never knew, that Prince Damansky—alias Hèrmann Müller—had originally planned the elopement to take place on the day before that fixed for Grace's marriage with Tredman. It had pleased the man's lust for revenge to plan that Giles should drink the cup of humiliation to the very dregs; should, as he expressed it, pay the penalty in full.

These malicious schemes were perforce modified when Rosa intervened to prevent any harm being done to Sylvia, and her betrayal of his nefarious schemes necessitated his hurried departure from England with Grace nearly a week sooner than he had intended. Perhaps no one was more horrified by what had happened than Rosa herself, and when Hugh tried to comfort her by telling her that now, at any rate, her uncle, who had been her evil genius, had left her life for ever, and was unlikely to trouble or alarm her again, she shook her head despairingly.

"You don't know him as I know him," she answered. "I do not think there was ever anyone so utterly vindictive. He will never forget, and never forgive what I did, and he has his tools everywhere."

"But when you are my wife, you need not be afraid of him or his tools," Hugh answered tenderly; "you will be an Englishwoman then, free from the web that has been round you so long. I think I can take care of you, sweetheart." But at his confident words she shivered, and shook her head again, a look of haunting fear in her eyes.

"Sir Giles wants to come and see me," she said, after a pause, "he is going back to India almost at once, and he wants if possible to find out what connection there is between my uncle and Sylvia, and why my uncle laid claims to the jewel which Sylvia's mother gave to her."

"And can you give Sir Giles the information he wants?"

"No. I really know nothing. I can only tell Sir Giles exactly what I told you."

And this she did, when, on the following day Giles and she sat together in the Stansdales' prim drawing-room. It shocked and hurt the girl to see what havoc had been wrought in Giles by all he had recently been through; he looked ten years older, and the sadness in his eyes haunted her for days afterwards. He spoke in quick, business-like tones, plainly anxious to avoid everything emotional,

"I felt that before I left for India, I ought to try and find out as much as I could about my little

Sylvia," he said, with scarcely any preliminary conversation. "It is to you that I owe her safety, and I believe that you can tell me more about her antecedents than anybody else can. First, is it true that this man Hermann Müller is really Prince Damansky?"

"Quite true. He sometimes uses one name, sometimes the other, according to where he is, and upon what work he is engaged. When he is busy with anarchist business, or business still more questionable, he masquerades as Müller. When he gives his services, as he has often done, to the Russian Secret Police, he is Prince Damansky, a rich aristocrat, who loathes anarchists and all their works. After all he has done, I have no scruple in telling you the truth about him."

"You cannot tell me what Sylvia's mother was to him?"

"I do not know. I can only guess that she was his wife, or that she supposed herself to be his wife. If she was not his wife, I do not believe he would ever have given her what Sylvia calls the wonder jewel."

"Then you think that this villain—this fiend—who would not even have stuck at murdering the child to gain his own ends, may be—and most likely is—her father?"

"It is quite true what you say that he would stick

at nothing—*nothing*—to gain his ends, whether they are actual advantages or merely revenge. And I think the other thing is quite true too: I believe some day you will find that Sylvia, little innocent Sylvia, is his daughter."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HERMANN'S VENGEANCE.

THE September day was very hot and still, and Hugh Berners, strolling homewards across one of the few fields that still defied the ravages of the suburban builder, lingered to watch the golden sky in the west, and to indulge in a delicious day-dream of all that awaited him now in the house which only a month ago had been a dreary bachelor establishment. It was just a week since he and Rosa had returned from their honeymoon, and already the metamorphosis of the house seemed to him little short of marvellous. Even his consulting-room, which had formerly been the drabbiest and dullest of rooms, had begun to wear an appearance of home, and Rosa's drawing-room seemed to her adoring husband the daintiest, loveliest place he had ever imagined.

As he lingered by the stile he liked to picture her sitting there, waiting for him : he liked to think how eagerly she would spring to her feet as he entered, how

her eyes would shine, and the bright colour sweep over her face at sight of him. Not to hurry home too quickly, but to dream about it all for a little while, would enhance the joy of taking her into his arms, and kissing her dear lips. The glowing western sky typified the glowing happiness in his own heart; he drank in the warm fragrance of the September afternoon, with a sense of being a part of all the glory of nature. Was ever wife so sweet as his wife? so his happy thoughts ran on as at last he crossed the stile, and moved slowly over the meadow that would bring him into the road near his house; was ever man so happy as he? was his final reflection as he opened his own garden gate, and walked up the path. As he entered the door of the house, he whistled three notes that were the signal of his home-coming, but there was no answering whistle from Rosa, and he paused for an instant in the hall, waiting and listening for her voice or footstep. But it suddenly dawned upon him that the house was oddly silent, and when a servant in the kitchen regions all at once broke into a gay little song, he felt inclined to call sharply to her to be quiet. That gay little song seemed to break in aggressively upon the surrounding silence, and as he went into his consulting-room, some of the overflowing joy died down within him.

"She is probably out," he said to himself, "after

all, why should I imagine she should always be here to greet me when I come in from my rounds? We shall have to settle down into the practical life of humdrum married people, and because she has never been out when I came home, it isn't going to follow that she never will be out."

He tried to whistle as he opened the letter that awaited him, but the whistling was a lamentable failure, and he felt no inclination to settle down to any writing. From the consulting-room he wandered into the drawing-room, whose daintiness seemed to lack something vital, now that Rosa was not there. He wandered back to the consulting-room, thence to the dining-room, next up to the bedroom above, but all alike were, as far as he was concerned, empty. His wife was nowhere in the house, and the house in consequence seemed to be without life or interest. He wondered whether he should go and meet her, but not having the vaguest notion in which direction to go, he laughed at himself for his impatience; only to emphasise how impatient he was, by calling down the kitchen stairs, to enquire whether Jane knew when Mrs. Berners would be back.

"Mrs. Berners hasn't gone out, sir," the maid answered; "she was in the drawing-room at tea time, and she told me she should be in till you came back."

In till he came back? Then where in the name

of fortune could she be? The garden? Fool that he was, the garden was of course the very place in which she would like to be on such an evening, and he hurried out of the consulting-room window, and called—

"Rosa! Rosa!" in his deep voice, that seemed to carry far beyond the bounds of his own small estate. But only the echoes of his own voice answered him; there was no sign of his wife's white gown in the place where she usually sat, under the pergola of roses close to his window. There were no longer roses in flower along the pergola, but in the beds on the lawn, and along the fence, tall hollyhocks, pink and crimson and golden yellow stood like stately sentinels, amongst a tangle of sweet peas and pink mallows, and gorgeous-hued nasturtiums.

"Rosa!" he called again, and then walked down the path by the hollyhocks, determined to leave no corner of his small domain unsearched. At the bottom of the garden a wicket-gate opened into a lane, which, like the meadow he had just traversed, was the last remains of country left in the now fashionable suburb, and as Hugh reached the gate, he saw that it swung open on its hinges. And just outside the gate, lying close under the hedge that skirted the lane, was a still figure in white, a figure at sight of which the young doctor

dropped on his knees, with a sharp exclamation of horror.

His wife lay there unconscious, apparently lifeless, a great stain of blood upon the whiteness of her gown, her face upturned to the golden sky, one of her hands thrown out as if in protest, the other, that one on which rested her wedding ring, hanging limply beside her, her eyes closed as if in death. For one paralysing moment Hugh thought she was dead, his reason overcome by the overpowering flood of emotion that had nearly shattered his senses, and in an agony of apprehension he bent over her to examine more closely what had happened to her. Her pulse still beat faintly, a feeble, flickering pulse; he felt it as his fingers touched her wrist, and as he realised that at least his most awful dread was not fulfilled, a tremendous revulsion of feeling swept over him, and he found himself shaking like an aspen leaf. But it was not in his nature to allow his emotions to get the better of his judgment and courage, and in another moment he was the cool and skilful doctor, manipulating the prostrate form with a rapid touch, until he found what he sought, a small, clean-cut wound in the breast, evidently inflicted by some sharp instrument.

Why the blow had not killed her then and there, was the question that instantly flashed through his brain, but there was no time to waste on speculation

or surmise. Before everything else, it was necessary to stay the still flowing blood, and to move Rosa to the house with all possible expedition. With the coolness of a man trained for long years in self-control, Hugh did all that could be done on the spot. Then, summoning aid, he helped to carry his still unconscious wife into their house, and lay her on the bed, where, with his own hands, he took off her dainty white gown with its ominous blood stains, and tended her with all that tenderness which is so essential a part of such a man's character. It was during the process of undressing her that he discovered what had at first puzzled him—why a blow struck as the blow must have been struck at Rosa, had not killed her instantaneously? Round her neck he found a fine gold chain, so fine as to be almost invisible, and on the chain a locket containing his own face, a locket which must have rested always against her heart. And upon the locket was a dent which could only have been impressed there by some sharp instrument, which, glanting off the surface, had inflicted upon its victim a far less deadly wound than must otherwise have been the case.

If it hadn't been for the locket she must have inevitably been killed, he thought, and as he knelt beside his still unconscious wife, and put his lips against her white face, his heart swelled with thank-

fulness, and he drew her head against his breast in a passion of tenderness. As his lips touched hers, she opened her eyes and looked up at him, the fear which was their first waking expression, changing to one of intense relief, and with a little moan she turned her face closer to him.

"You will soon be better, my sweet," he said softly. "Lie still and rest now, don't try to talk."

"I told you he would do it," she whispered, her hand feeling for his hand, the fear coming back to her eyes. "He never forgets — he never forgives."

"You mean——" Hugh began, but her low hurried whisper continued, almost as if she had not heard him.

"Hermann meant me to be killed—I knew it—when I saw Michael by the gate."

"Michael?" Hugh put in, and the hurried voice went on:

"Yes, Michael, he—was Hermann's servant—he helped—in all the work. I—was at—the gate—and I saw him in the lane—watching me. His eyes were so cruel—oh! I was afraid." Her voice died away breathlessly, and Hugh held a restorative to her lips, and implored her to rest now, to say no more —to wait to tell him the remainder until she was better.

"I—want to tell you now," she insisted weakly. "I want you to know. When I saw Michael's cruel face, when I saw how he smiled at me, I knew he had come to hurt me. I tried to turn and run up the garden,—I—screamed out to you, though I knew you were not there, and he laughed — Michael laughed—a mocking laugh—and sprang at me—and —I saw him lift something bright and shining—and he struck at me—and I can't remember any more. It was all dark and cold—so cold—and so dark," a shiver ran through her, as she uttered the last words almost inaudibly, and then her limbs relaxed, and she relapsed once more into complete unconsciousness.

Many days went by before she was again able to give any coherent account of what had taken place. She talked continually, but the talk was the wild wandering of delirium, and she babbled on and on of episodes in her past life, of her work with Müller—of places and people she had known, but oftenest of Hugh, her husband. Although she did not know him, and would look at him as if he were a total stranger, his touch and voice never failed to soothe her even at her worst, and she was never so quiet and at rest, as when he sat beside her bed, her hand held closely in his. The search for the miscreant who had so nearly taken her life was unavailing. Michael had vanished with a cleverness worthy of a

better cause; and moreover, the house in Graham Street where Hermann and his confederates had been wont to meet, was, when raided by the police, found to be empty. The furniture, such as it was, still stood in the rooms, but the rooms themselves were tenantless. The occupants had flown, leaving no trace behind them.

CHAPTER XIX.

FATE'S IRONY.

"THE irony of fate!" Those words leapt unbidden to Giles Tredman's lips, when on a morning in the following May he read a brief notice in the newspaper.

"A tragic accident occurred yesterday on the high road between Aix les Bains and Chambery. Prince Damansky was driving his own motor at a high rate of speed, when, for some unexplained reason, the wheel skidded, the car rushed into a tree by the roadside, and the occupants were flung out into a field. The Prince was fatally injured, and no hope is entertained of his recovery. His wife, who was with him, received only slight injuries. Their servant was killed on the spot."

Tredman laid the paper down, and his eyes looked out across the compound. All the familiar surroundings of his Indian bungalow faded from his view; he no longer heard the chattering voices of his

servants in the back regions, nor noticed the harsh notes of a bird which a few minutes earlier had grated intolerably on his ears. Before his mental vision rose a long white road, with meadows on either hand, and beyond the meadows blue mountains against a bluer sky. And along the highway, white with dust, a great black motor whirled into sight, bringing with it death and destruction. How plainly he could see it all again. The sinister black car; the little pony carriage overturned in the white road, the dark, evil face of the car's owner, and the pitiful face of the woman lying on the grass by the roadside; all these flashed before his mind like the slides of a kaleidoscope. And again he murmured under his breath, "the irony of fate." It would seem that Divine justice had done what human justice had failed to do. No efforts made by Giles himself to trace the man who had stolen little Sylvia had been successful. Müller—alias Prince Damansky—alias how many other names it was impossible to say—had vanished from the ken of his world. Rumour occasionally located him here or there, now in Berlin, now in Paris, Monte Carlo, and even Rome, but the elusive rumours were never verified; and although Mrs. Cardew now and again received letters from Grace, they never gave any address, and the post mark, if followed up, proved as elusive as rumour. And now the man was fatally injured, perhaps even

dead, and Grace in all probability a widow! But to Giles' own immense astonishment, that last reflection aroused in him no keener emotion than if he had suddenly learnt of the widowhood of some casual acquaintance. Grace had killed his love, killed it completely and entirely, on the day when his belief in her died.

"Poor soul!" was all he said to himself now, "poor soul!"

Those same words rose to Hugh Berners' lips when he, in his English home, read the account of the motor tragedy, and gently broke to his wife the tidings of what had occurred.

"Oh, Hugh!" she exclaimed, "if she loves Hermann as I love you, I am sorry for her. She behaved horribly and treacherously to Sir Giles, but she loved Hermann; I am sorry for her now. To see one's man die a dreadful death, oh! Hugh."

"I don't want to say she deserves all she has got," answered Hugh grimly, "but when I think of poor Sir Giles' stricken face at the time of her elopement with that man, I can't feel much sympathy for her. And you can hardly expect me to sympathise with the man who did his best to kill you," he added, with a smile.

"Now that I am so happy, I feel as if I wanted to forgive all the world," she said, putting her hand into her husband's, as he leant over the armchair

in which she sat, "and, Hugh, I can't help remembering that in spite of everything that has happened since, he was good to me when I was little, and—my mother loved him."

"He didn't repay her love in a way that commends itself to me," was the stern retort. "He made a tool of you, and then, directly you acted against his wishes, he was ready to have you put out of the way. I can't feel a grain of pity for him."

"But you must let me go and see him," Rosa answered, pulling herself upright in the armchair, and looking up into Hugh's amazed face. "Yes, wait a minute before you say anything, my darling. I never want to go against your wishes, or do anything you don't like, never—never. But I feel—I can't tell you how strongly I feel—that I must go and see Hermann before he dies. He was my mother's only brother; yes, I know he was only a half-brother, still she loved him very much, and, besides that, I can't explain to you what I feel about it," she drew her brows together with a puzzled expression; "it is something I do not understand myself, so I cannot give you an explanation. But it seems to me as if I must go, as if I were told to go, even if it is against my inclination. Please do not hinder me, dear."

"I shall certainly not hinder you if you feel you

ought to do this thing, but I confess I don't quite understand your strong feeling about it."

"I don't understand it myself," she replied, with another puzzled drawing together of her brows. "Only I feel that I must see Hermann before the end comes. Something calls me to him—I must go." Under the circumstances Hugh Berners was far too wise a man to oppose his wife, and leaving his work for a few days in the hands of a colleague, he escorted Rosa to the little town, ringed round by its fertile meadows and blue mountains, in the sunny land of Savoy. There was no difficulty in discovering the whereabouts of the man they had come to see. The accident had made Prince Damansky the centre of interest in the place, and Hugh and Rosa were driven at once to the hotel in which the Prince lay.

Rosa immediately despatched a note to the Damanskys' apartments, and the servant who took it returned in a few minutes with the message that Madame la Princesse would see the English lady without delay, and Rosa was escorted upstairs into a stiffly-furnished sitting-room. She had not seen Grace since they had met frequently in London, during the weeks of the previous spring: and when she looked into the white, set face of the woman who awaited her in the sitting-room, she found it difficult to believe this was the brilliant Grace Cardew,

who had been one of the beauties of the season only a year before. Her features were still lovely, nothing could change the perfect contours of her face, the delicate chiselling of brow and lips, but the eyes that had been so blue and bright were dull with suffering; the very brightness of her hair was dimmed, and her mouth was fixed in hard lines of pain.

"You are his niece," she said, looking at Rosa with those tired, grief-stricken eyes, "he is conscious—he would like to see you—he cannot live long, you know." She jerked out the words in broken phrases, and her voice was quite level and monotonous; there was no life in its tones.

"He was so badly hurt?" the other questioned, a great pity for the woman before her filling her heart.

"Yes! nothing could be done. He is just—waiting for the end—that is all."

"Oh! but I am so sorry for you," Rosa cried impetuously, putting out her hands to Grace with a gesture of irrepressible sympathy; "you love him?"

"Yes, I love him," the strangely toneless voice answered; "I never loved anybody before. I never knew what love was. He taught me. It is heaven and hell all in one."

"I think it is only heaven," Rosa said gently.

"Heaven? Yes, if you have your man and are

happy. Hell, if you have to let him go, as I must." The mechanical note in her voice all at once faltered and broke, her face lost its look of set hardness, her lips quivered.

"You had better come to him," she said abruptly. "He knows you are here—he must not be kept waiting. And you must not stay long—there is so little time for me——"

The sentence was not finished, a sob broke from her, a dry, tearless sob, infinitely more pitiful than tears could have been; and she controlled herself immediately.

"He must not see me upset," she said, "the doctor says we must keep him as quiet as we can—between the paroxysms of pain. Come!" and so saying, she led the way across a corridor, into a big bedroom where, in the bed facing the window, her husband lay. His form was very rigid and still, his face the colour of death, but his dark eyes were strangely full of life, and as the two women entered the room together, they lighted up, and he smiled.

"My beautiful—white—queen," he whispered, his glance fixed on Grace, "you and I—are—paying the price . . . And Rosa has come?" his glance turned from his wife to Rosa, "why have you come? To gloat over my downfall?"

"No, no—oh! no," she knelt down by the bed, and put a hand over his hand, that lay motionless on

the sheet. "I came—because I was—sorry, because I—could not help coming. Something—made me come."

"Ah! so that was it? Something made you come," he smiled again, a faintly sardonic smile, then went on softly: "It must have been your good angel who sent you, or your good fate, or whatever you choose to call it. For, seeing you has reminded me of what I might have forgotten, even in this place. Though this place, above all others, should make me remember," he added dreamily.

"Funny," he rambled on, after a moment of silence. "It was on that very same white road where I practically met my death, that I ran—her down—Tiny, you know—and the child. What is the child's name, I forget?"

"Sylvia," Rosa put in.

"Sylvia, that was it; she was there with her mother, the day my car ran down their pony carriage. I didn't know then that the child—was mine—hers and mine," he stirred uneasily, and for an instant Rosa thought his mind was wandering; but he understood her thought, and shook his head.

"No, I'm sane enough, my brain hasn't given way, though—I have come to the end. She—was my wife—Sylvia's mother—my wife, an English girl—Hester Stansdale was her name. She ran away from her own people for my sake. She—two women

have loved me," he broke off to say, with a long upward look at Grace, "but—she—was afraid of what she had done. She and I—were never really mated. She—was afraid of me, as well as of her own action in running away with me," he spoke on in curiously dreamy tones, almost as though he had forgotten his listeners. Then, suddenly awaking to their presence, he said slowly—

"I—tired of her, it is no use pretending now—I was never much good at pretending—and I showed her I was tired of her, and when I tired of her—I left her."

There was something almost brutal in the quiet cynicism with which he spoke, and perhaps Rosa's face reflected her shrinking shame at his words, for his hand moved under hers, and in more softened accents he said quietly—

"You are thinking I was a brute. You are right. I was a brute. I believe I have always been a brute—until," again his eyes met those of his wife, "until I made Grace love me. Since then the brute in me has slowly died; but—now—all the same, I pay the penalty." Again came a long, long pause, during which neither woman spoke, then once more the dying man resumed—

"I—am glad you came, Rosa. My mind was full of Grace—only Grace—but now I see you—I remember those others, and I—must set a wrong right.

Though— I am a brute," he smiled faintly, "I can—still—do justice—in the end. Yes—I meant to have had the child put out of the way, and you too," again his hand stirred under hers, "the devil awoke in me, when I was crossed by that fellow Tredman—and when you betrayed me. But now, I can do justice to the child; and you—there is nothing I can do for you, you have got happiness written in your eyes."

"I am happy," she answered simply. "I have married the best man I ever knew. I am happy."

"I—am glad," his voice was growing weaker, "if I had it all to do again, perhaps—I would make a different thing of life—I don't know. I was born with a devil in me, and I have never tried to get the better of him. I have always let him rule me. If some day—you are the mother of a son—teach him to conquer his devil, teach him to keep the brute in him in subjection, and then perhaps he will not come to the end—with remorse in his heart—as I have come." Grace bent over him, her hand stroking back his dark hair, an agony of grief and tenderness in her eyes.

"Don't talk any more," she said, "you are tired Rest now——"

"I shall have plenty of time presently for rest," he answered with a smile. "Let me tell Rosa—what she can do—to set right the wrong I have

done. Then—I can rest—until the end—and afterwards—perhaps—if God is as good as they say."

"What is it I can do for you?" Rosa questioned, when he paused once more.

"The jewel—the jewel I tried to get, is Sylvia's. I gave it to her mother when the child was born. I said it should be the child's heritage. It is hers. And——" he frowned, as if making an effort of memory, "there are lands—in Russia—which must go to Sylvia, because she is my only child. I hoped for a son. I have no son, the lands are Sylvia's. You must prove that she is my child," his hand caught and gripped Rosa's hand, "the proofs are in the ivory box that holds the jewel. No one could ever find that out, unless they were told. Sylvia's mother knew—and I knew. There is a false bottom to the box—and if you look, you will find the papers that prove my marriage to Sylvia's mother, and the child's birth certificate. She must have her rightful name,—her rightful property—the rest—all—that I have to leave I have given to my wife." With the last words he turned his gaze from Rosa, and fixed it upon Grace, and his niece realised that already he had almost forgotten she was beside him.

"I will do all you wish," she said softly, rising from her knees, and at the sound of her voice he looked at her again.

"It has never been my way to ask for forgiveness,"

he said brusquely, "but I should be glad to know—you had forgiven me. I am sorry for—all the evil I have done—for all the evil," he repeated wistfully. He did not wait for her answer, but turning with difficulty stretched both his hands to his wife, and Rosa stole away, feeling that her work was done—that these two who were so soon to be parted, had a right to be left alone, with no other eyes to watch their last good-bye.

CHAPTER XX.

HOME AGAIN.

SITTING back in the railway carriage as the express rattled up from Dover, Giles Tredman looked out at the blossoming orchards, and let his thoughts wander back over the six years that had passed since he had last seen the green fields and flowering loveliness of an English spring. Four years of military duty in India had been followed by another two of wandering over the globe; his wanderings prompted by a shrinking dislike to coming back to England, and to taking up life as a country squire, now that his dream of sharing that life with Grace was for ever shattered. But at last, after six years of absence, conscience had spurred him on to return to Birdsbrook and settle down to the duties entailed by the big property he had inherited.

"Sylvia and her aunt, Miss Stansdale, must keep home for me," he reflected, as his eyes rested grate-

fully on the vivid green of wood and hedgerow, and the white glory of fruit blossom against the May sky, "and although I have no intention of ever putting my heart into a woman's hands again, one can contrive to get a good deal of contentment out of life without a woman's help." He was alone in the carriage, and he laughed a low laugh, that had in it a ring of bitterness. "Grace killed my faith in womankind," his thoughts ran on, "before it was dead, I believed in a good woman, as I believed in God! Now——" he shrugged his shoulders significantly, and the smile on his face was very unlike the old, frank smile that had formerly lent him such charm. "And Grace went into a convent after her husband's death. Grace—and a convent—they seem as incongruous as two things can well be, and yet—what right have I to judge her? Perhaps—the other man awakened her heart. God forgive me for being hard either upon her or him." The softened thought brought a softer look into his eyes, and from these tragic memories of the past, he turned to more happy remembrances.

"Little Sylvia," so his thoughts ran next, "will she be at the station to meet me? And will she fling her arms round my neck, as she did when I came away? Is she still the same impulsive loving child? Or has she reached a gawky school girl age, when she will be self-conscious and uninteresting,"

an amused smile hovered over his lips, "she is confoundedly rich, and by and by when she is grown up, I shall have to ward off fortune hunters, and play the heavy father."

The picture of Sylvia—his little girl, Sylvia, surrounded by fortune hunters, with himself in the rôle of defender and protector, drew from him a chuckle of amusement. But he thought of it all as something quite in the remote future; he still pictured Sylvia as the child he had left, or at any rate very little changed, and he conjured up pleasant visions of taking her on his knee in the twilight, just as he used to do, and telling her stories of fairy legends he had diligently collected for her in various parts of the globe.

"I wish I had kept myself more in touch with her during the last two years," he muttered, as he remembered, with self-reproach, how few and far between had been his letters to Sylvia, and how very long it was since he had received any letter from her, because in his constant travellings he had never given her any address to which to write. Why, when he came to think of it, it must be nearly two years since he had sanctioned Miss Stansdale's taking the child to London regularly, to allow of her having masters, and attending dancing classes. Sylvia's money affairs he had relegated to his solicitor, and he had given the child's aunt a free hand as to the little

girl's education, but his conscience pricked him nevertheless, when he recollected how long—how very long—it was, since he had taken any personal part in the direction of his ward's affairs.

Those rather reproachful thoughts occupied him throughout the greater part of his journey to London, and haunted him at intervals during the night he spent in town, before proceeding home. And they were uppermost in his mind next day, when his train slowed into Birdsbrook station, and he leant from the carriage window, eagerly scanning the figures on the platform in search of Sylvia. But no sign of the child was to be seen, and the footman who advanced to meet him was a stranger.

"Miss Sylvia has not come to the station?" he asked, with an odd feeling of disappointment, then, noticing a look of surprise on the man's face, he added: "Miss Stansdale and the young lady are at home, aren't they?"

"Oh! yes sir, Miss Damansky" (Giles started involuntarily), "has sent the brougham for you. She said she thought you might find the evening chilly, after being so long in warm parts."

Sylvia giving orders about the carriage? His

little girl arranging things for his comfort? He smiled as he stepped into the carriage, thinking tenderly of the child's thoughtfulness, looking forward with an eagerness that surprised himself, to seeing her small sweet face and its cloud of dusky hair. The drive through the lanes, full of the promise of summer, was refreshing to the man coming straight from the East, and his eyes feasted on the delicate green of the hawthorn leaves, and the pure whiteness of its flowers; feasted, too, on the sheets of bluebells that made a carpet for the hazel copses, and on the pale primroses that starred the hedgerows.

The air was sweet with the fragrance of growing things: the sky was blue as a May sky can be, larks were singing on the uplands, and on the pear tree by the lodge gate a thrush sat and trilled forth his song of summer and of joy. His liquid vibrating notes brought a smile to Giles' face, and the old lodge keeper, having curtsied to him and shut the gate again, said to her crippled daughter—

"'Twas good to see his smile. He looked so stern and old when he drove up to the gate, he seemed like a changed man, but when he smiled he was himself again."

"Maybe he hasn't forgotten that lady who played him false," her daughter answered sagely; "some

people never forget, and she played him a shabby trick."

"They do say she was paid out for it," the other woman answered; "some say the lady was wild with grief when the other gentleman died, the one she ran away with. Some say she would get Sir Giles back now if she could."

"Wherever did you hear such nonsense as that, mother?" questioned her daughter derisively, and Mrs. Budd shook her head solemnly, and answered—

"Well, my dear, I hears what I hears, and I see, what I sees, and Miss Nash, Miss Sylvia's new maid, she told me as she had heard from a friend of hers that the lady Sir Giles was going to marry shut herself up for a bit, but she didn't stay shut up for long, not being that sort, as Miss Nash said, she having known her once upon a time."

Mrs. Budd's daughter smiled at her mother's rambling dissertation, and knowing the worthy old lady's marvellous faculty for picking up every stray crumb of gossip, put very little faith in her statements; only wishing in her kindly and romantic soul that Sir Giles' false love might after all, come back to him, and atone for her past misdoings. And meanwhile, Sir Giles himself was being driven swiftly

along the drive, his glances falling with satisfaction on the smooth stretches of grass, and the spreading trees, which make an English park so lovely and restful a place to the eyes. The western sky shone full upon the front of the old Elizabethan house, as the carriage drove up to the front door, and the light glowed golden on the diamond paned windows and on the warm red of its bricks; and round the gables outlined against a daffodil sky, rooks wheeled, cawing softly, on their way to their nests in the tall elm trees across the meadows. The front door was set wide open, and on the topmost step stood an elderly lady in black whom Giles recognised at once as Miss Stansdale. But beside her was a girl—slim, tall, erect—a girl with shining eyes and flushing face, at sight of whom, Giles, as he descended from the carriage, stared in unfeigned amazement. She wore a white gown, and in her waist belt she had thrust a great bunch of crimson hothouse roses, whose warm sweetness was wafted to Giles as he mounted the steps. For a moment he stared at her with bewildered eyes, feeling that he must be the victim of some extraordinary delusion.

"Where is——" he began, and at the same instant the girl in her white gown came quickly down the steps, both hands outstretched, a world of loving welcome in her face.

"Monsieur! Why, Monsieur," she cried. "I do

believe you didn't know me." Her hands seized his hands, she lifted her face with all the impulsive eagerness of her childhood, then drew back, her colour deepening, a certain shy dignity all at once taking the place of the child-like impetuosity.

"I was just going to say, 'Where is Sylvia?'" he answered, looking at her with a smile, that still held bewilderment. "I had been picturing you as still a little child, and—" he broke off abruptly, as he turned to shake hands with Miss Stansdale, but the puzzled look was still in his eyes, and he was conscious of feeling an odd sense of loss.

It was perfectly absurd to feel anything of the sort, nevertheless, he did feel as though his little girl Sylvia had left him, as though this new Sylvia was a stranger, somebody quite different from the child of whom he had been dreaming, the child who would have flung her arms about his neck, and kissed his cheek. *This* Sylvia had lifted her face, as if her first instinct had been to treat him as she had treated him in those days of childhood. But she had drawn back at once, with the shy, sweet dignity that sat so well upon her, and he—looking at her—whilst she poured out the tea in the sunlit drawing-room, found himself wondering what it would have been like to kiss those cheeks of hers, that made him

think of the delicately tinted petals of a white rose. He thrust the thought away immediately, reminding himself sternly that Sylvia was his ward, and he merely her guardian, in her eyes probably a middle-aged guardian, and she must be treated now as the grown-up young lady she actually was. And he, in his folly, had forgotten the flight of years, had been imagining her as still a child, and had even dreamt day dreams of taking her on his knee and telling her Eastern fairy stories. The thoughts beat backwards and forwards in his brain, whilst he drank tea, and ate bread and butter, and answered Sylvia's eager questions, and Miss Stansdale's more sedate ones: whilst his observant glance took more of the details of his ward's appearance. Her dusky hair no longer fell in a torrent down her back, it was arranged about her shapely head in that admirable disorder which can only be achieved by a first-rate maid. Giles noticed how well she carried her head, and with what grace she moved; noticed, too, the depth and softness of her eyes, and the sweetness of her smile, which brought back the child Sylvia so vividly to his mind. Her voice was very gentle, with a vibrant note in it which gave it added charm, and her laugh was deliciously spontaneous.

"Sylvia always sees the humorous in everything," Miss Stansdale said, when the girl laughed over some

story that Giles told them of his homeward journey. "I call her a happy soul."

"Haven't I got everything to make me happy?" she answered, "a perfect home, and all any reasonable being could want, and the kindest guardian in the world," she added, with a fleeting glance at the bronzed face, and the grey eyes that were watching her so intently.

"A guardian who has no notion how to manage a young lady ward," he answered, with a laugh, half rueful, half amused. "Oughtn't she to have a season, or something?" he said, looking helplessly at Miss Stansdale. That gentle little lady smiled.

"I am afraid we ventured to have a season last year," she answered, "you see Sylvia was nearly eighteen, and Lady Ferndale, our nearest neighbour, urged me to take her to town, and as we could not get at you to ask your leave, we thought we had better risk doing without it. I do hope we were not wrong?" she added deprecatingly; "but Lady Ferndale assured me it was the wisest and best thing to do."

"Quite right, and of course you are her aunt, though I still have to get used to that fact!" Giles answered, with an increasing sensation of bewilderment; it was so very strange to find himself the arbiter of this lovely young woman's fate. "I ought

not to have been out of your reach for so long. I am afraid I forgot my responsibilities. I never realised that Sylvia was grown up at all, much less that she would have to do all the things that are proper for a grown-up young lady to do. I must try to make amends now for my neglect."

In the days that followed, he did his utmost to carry out this resolve, escorting Sylvia to garden parties and other social functions, riding with her, driving with her, and giving her—as she herself expressed it—"a perfectly heavenly time."

"She must go to town again, yes, certainly," he had said to Miss Stansdale soon after his arrival; "we had better take a house for a few weeks. She must have all the fun she likes."

"It isn't only that," the little lady answered nervously. She and Giles were having their talk alone together in the library, "but—you see, as Lady Ferndale said, 'Sylvia is a great heiress, and she ought to marry well.' And we have no right to keep her down here out of sight. She ought to meet nice people, and have a chance of marrying quite suitably."

"She ought to meet nice people, and have a chance of marrying suitably," the words haunted Giles long after they were uttered, and he fell into the habit of glancing round the groups of young men at garden

parties and other gatherings, and wondering which of the "silly young asses" would be likely to attract Sylvia's fancy. Youth would naturally draw to youth, he thought; one of these young fellows in the twenties would be a fitting mate for the girl who was just entering into womanhood. She must naturally regard her guardian—a man eighteen years her senior—as bordering on the elderly; in fact, the person who stood to her in the place of her father.

Her father! That reflection never failed to bring a grim smile to his face, whilst his pulses quickened their beat, as a vision of the girl swept before his mind, in all her slender young loveliness. What would be the sensations of the man who some day held her in his arms, and looked deep into her eyes. What would those eyes themselves be like when they were alight with love? And how would the man feel who had the right to touch those lips of hers with his lips, who might kiss her rose-tinted cheek, and the dusky crown of her hair? He put the thoughts from him almost as soon as they came, but they forced themselves upon him nevertheless; and the result of the struggle with his own heart showed itself in a certain distance and stiffness of manner towards his ward. Sylvia noticed the difference in him, without being able to understand or account for it, and it was with a sensation of actual relief

that she left the court early in June, and took up her quarters in London with Miss Stansdale.

Giles had promised to join them as often as possible, but Sylvia acknowledged to herself with an aching heart that she would rather not have her guardian with her at all, than have a guardian so changed, so cold, so different. And when day after day passed, and Giles did not come, when the season drifted on, and Giles sent repeated excuses for his non-appearance, the girl began to be convinced that something in her must have disappointed or disgusted her guardian. And yet she cared so very much to stand well in his eyes! All the other men she met had to run the gauntlet of comparison with Giles, and not one of them came within measurable distance of him in Sylvia's estimation. Since the day when he had first taken her under his care, the long-ago day of her mother's tragic death, adoration for Monsieur had been the dominating feeling in her heart. But this aloof and changed Monsieur had made her heart ache, had given her the miserable certainty that she was no longer his little girl, but merely a burden and a weariness to him, from which he was only too anxious to escape. Once or twice she had a wild thought of marrying one of the many men who courted her; if she married, she would relieve her guardian of her presence, he would no longer be hampered by her. But further reflection invariably

made such a step seem impossible, altogether out of the question: she shrank from the very idea of closer contact with the men who were pleasant acquaintances—even friends, and Giles' image always rose up in her mind, and effectually swamped the images of all the rest of mankind.

"And Monsieur only looks on me as a little girl. I believe he is vexed because I am grown up, and more trouble now than I was when I was really small," she thought sadly, "and still he doesn't feel about me as if I was grown up, he feels I am a little girl—just a little girl."

This conviction of hers infused into her manner to Giles when they next met, a certain want of ease, a self-consciousness never before observable in her demeanour. Her naturally spontaneous manner became restrained and stiff. She no longer showed the impulsiveness which had formed so large a part of her charm; and she was quiet, almost cold, to her guardian. He had come to London to spend the last week of their sojourn there with them, but to him, as to Sylvia, it was not a time of pleasure but of strain and discomfort; and to both of them it was a relief when they returned to Manderby Court, where each one secretly hoped that the old life would be resumed on its old lines. But in this hope they were both disappointed. The barrier that seemed to have grown up between them, the

indefinable barrier which neither could have wholly explained, did not vanish when they were back in the familiar home surroundings. On the contrary, it seemed to Sylvia that in some inexplicable way the barrier grew and grew, until it became like a wall of ice, a wall over or through which it was impossible to penetrate.

CHAPTER XXI.

GRACE'S EXPIATION.

It was at the county gathering of the summer, Lady Ferndale's garden party, that Giles Tredman again came face to face with the woman who, nearly eight years before, had broken his heart. He was bringing Sylvia from the tea tent, and they were walking slowly together across the lawn, talking in disjointed sentences, when a tall figure in black emerged from a side walk, and met them face to face.

For the flash of a second Giles looked silently into the fair face of the woman he had once loved so passionately, then he lifted his hat, and greeted her quietly, surprised at himself because his pulses did not quicken, nor did his heart beat by the fraction of a beat more quickly.

"I wondered if I should meet you here to-day," Grace said, and Giles noticed how level and monotonous were the tones of her voice. "I—hoped

I should," she paused, then glanced at the girl by Giles' side.

"Is this your ward?" she asked, a quiver passing over her face that had hitherto been very impassive and cold. "I—she——" her voice trailed into silence, and Giles, all the pity in his chivalrous nature aroused, said gently—

"Yes, this is my ward Sylvia" (he refrained from mentioning the girl's surname). "I feel most incompetent to perform my duties towards her as I ought, though I do my best." He spoke at random, feeling the embarrassment of the position, and wishing that this chance meeting could have been avoided. But Grace brushed aside his lightly-spoken words, and went straight to the head of the matter, as a woman will who has known the depths of sorrow.

"I have only lately come back to England," she said, "I—have been away—since," her voice broke, and again died into silence, a wave of emotion again swept over her face. "I went for a time into a convent, not as a nun, I could never bear the existence," she shuddered. "but—I wanted the peace of it, the rest of it for a little while. And now I want to try and begin—some sort of life in the world again." Giles, looking into her face, wondered what the real woman was like beneath the marble mask she wore, for, saving those two waves of feeling

that had stirred her features, they had remained impassive, rigid, still, with a kind of frozen stillness. Her eyes were like blue ice, her mouth was set in a straight line, there was a curious lack of expression in her whole face, and although its outlines could not fail to be still beautiful, it was as if there were no soul to the beauty.

"I am glad to have seen you, and—your ward to-day," the monotonous voice went on, "I— wronged you. He — wronged — the child. I have tried to set right the wrong which he did. She—is called by his name?" The words were a question, and Giles, with one swift glance at Sylvia's lovely, troubled face, answered—

"Yes, directly I knew who Sylvia was, I said she was to be called by her father's name. She is Miss Damansky now."

"She is not like—him," Grace's eyes were fixed almost hungrily on the girl, for one moment a flash of feeling lighted up their coldness, "I—wish—I—should like—her to come and talk to me—just for a few minutes, if she might—if you can spare her." For an instant Sylvia shrank back a little, then the sight of the other woman's frozen face awakened her pity, and she put out her hands to Grace, with some of her natural impetuosity.

"Of course I will come," she said, "Monsieur can spare me. He had only just been giving me tea, and he was taking me to find Aunt Helen. I can find her presently for myself, Monsieur," she added, with a shy, upward glance at him.

"I will not hurt her, or disturb her," Grace turned to Giles, and spoke in low tones, inaudible to Sylvia, "I am only here for one night. I shall not see either of you again. At least it is not likely that I shall ever see you again, and I—want to tell you—that I am sorry for all that happened —years ago. I treated you abominably. I—am sorry."

She put out her hand to him, and Giles held it for a moment in his strong grasp, marvelling, as he did so, that the touch of her hand produced in him no emotion whatever: dimly aware that his glances turned almost involuntarily from the still face of the woman, to the pitiful face of the girl, who stood a little apart. Grace did not give him time to answer her words. Having spoken them, and shaken him by the hand, she turned back to Sylvia, and putting her arm through the girl's, drew her towards a summer-house, along the side path by which she had just come.

"I am glad I have seen you to-day," she said, when they stood alone in the little rose-covered

place. "I have wanted to meet you, and dreaded meeting you. Do you know it was he—your father —who made me know what love means. I never realised what it meant until I knew him. When he died—something in me froze and died, too. But some day, perhaps, it will awake and live again," she looked out across the garden, framed by the doorway and its tangle of crimson roses. "But I want to tell you, that there is nothing else in the world so great as love." Sylvia looked at her wonderingly. To the girl's natural reticence, this strange woman's lack of it seemed most curious, but she faintly realised that Grace's nerves were at high tension, that she was speaking now, as undoubtedly she would not have done under quite normal conditions.

"Never let anything or anybody come between you and love," Grace went on, "but—" she put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and looked deep into her eyes, "never do, as I did, promise to marry if you do not love, for the sake of any lesser thing. I—never loved Giles."

"Oh!" the word slipped from Sylvia's lips, and the indignation, the amazement that were embodied in that one exclamation, brought a faint smile to Grace's lips.

"I was pleased and flattered when he asked me to marry him. I liked his position, his title, all

that he could give me. But—I did not know what love meant — until your father came, and swept me off my feet. It was wrong — all wrong — to have hurt Giles as I did. But — the first wrong was in ever promising to be his wife, when I did not love him. Remember that!"

Sylvia tried to answer, but the elder woman silenced her before she could utter a syllable.

"I think it is so unlikely we shall ever meet again, that I am going to say something very strange to you," she said, and Sylvia, swallowing down an inclination to reply that the whole conversation seemed strange to her, answered—

"Why should you think we shall never meet again?"

"Because I am only here to see my mother, and to arrange some business, and then I shall go away again out of England—to travel —to see new lands, and — to begin a new life."

"I am so sorry for you," Sylvia exclaimed impulsively, leaning forward and kissing the white impassive face. A tinge of colour ran over it at the touch of the girlish lips, and Grace's voice was less steady, less monotonous, as she resumed —

"Your happiness—is here—within your grasp—you will not let it go?"

"I don't understand," Sylvia faltered, embarrassed, she scarcely knew why, by the keen glance of those blue eyes.

"I—should like—to help Giles to happiness," the slow voice continued. "I hurt him so much, I should like to be sure he is happy at last. And—you know, his happiness lies in your hands."

"*In—my—hands?*" A tide of crimson flowed over Sylvia's face, her eyes dropped beneath the other's searching gaze.

"You poor blind little girl," Grace laughed, a strangely mirthless little laugh, "I saw in five minutes, what I believe you have not yet discovered — that Giles is hopelessly in love with you."

"Oh!" Sylvia exclaimed, drawing herself away from the hands on her shoulders, and flushing yet more vividly, "indeed you are making a mistake. Monsieur did not like my growing up. He was not pleased when he came back from India, and found a grown-up girl here, instead of a little child. He"—her voice quivered—"he is quite different to me now, quite cold and changed, and there is a great wall between us, and——"

"Silly little girl," Grace's voice softened oddly, "can't you understand it all? It is as plain to me, as if Giles had put it into words for my enlightenment. He has fallen in love with his ward, but he will never let her know it! He thinks he is far too old to ask you to marry him, he thinks you look upon him as a sort of father, he thinks it would be unfair to you to bind you to him, when young men — nearer your own age — would make you happier."

"But they wouldn't," she exclaimed hotly, "nobody could make me happier, nobody could make me a quarter so happy as Monsieur. There isn't anybody like him in the world."

"Then, my dear little girl, tell him so. He will believe nobody but you yourself. He is breaking his heart for you, and he will never tell you. But if you love him, tell him the truth. He would laugh it to scorn if anybody else told him, but——"

"I could never do that," Sylvia exclaimed, with a proud lift of her head; "you don't know what you are asking me to do. I could never——"

"You must not let love go,"—a sudden vehemence came into Grace's voice, as she interrupted Sylvia's speech—"love is too great a thing to lose for the sake of any false pride. Don't throw away your

happiness and his, because you are afraid of being unwomanly. Be true to yourself—and to him—and you will be true to your womanhood. Love—is the greatest thing in the world. For God's sake do not throw it away!"

CHAPTER XXII.

HIS LITTLE GIRL!

"BUT of course it is impossible, quite impossible. I could never tell Monsieur the truth—never!" Sylvia said the words under her breath, as she stood before the long glass in her bedroom that evening, surveying her own reflection, before she went downstairs to dinner.

During the whole course of the drive home from the garden party, Grace's words had danced before her eyes, written over fields, and woods, and uplands, in letters of fire.

"He is breaking his heart for you, and he will never tell you. But if you love him—tell him the truth." Her answers to Aunt Helen's placid little remarks were absent and somewhat perfunctory, and more than once she was conscious of Giles' curious glances at her across the carriage. But though she roused herself, and made an effort to bear her part in the conversation, Grace's words still

filled her brain, and now, in the privacy of her own room, she had been going over again all that the other woman had said to her, coming to the final conclusion that to act upon the advice was a total impossibility. Her glass reflected a very fair vision, but Sylvia was too absorbed by the thoughts in her mind, too free from all personal vanity, to take into consideration the loveliness of her own mirrored face and form. Tall, slight, graceful, she looked like some stately young princess in her flowing white draperies, relieved only by one huge red rose at her waist. Her face was faintly flushed because of the thoughts with which her mind was filled; there was a strange brightness in her eyes, and the crown of her dusky hair emphasised the delicacy of the colouring, which someone had once compared to the dainty tints of a white rose.

"I couldn't ever do it," she repeated, her fingers softly adjusting the great crimson rose at her belt. "Supposing she has made a mistake—supposing Monsieur doesn't really care—as she thinks—I should die of shame, and oh! I could not do it anyhow. I have not the courage, even though—even though I know he is all the world to me." She dropped her voice to a whisper, and a rosy colour swept over her face, as she turned away from the glass, and looked out over the twilit garden before leaving her room. Warm fragrances of summer drifted into her upon

the soft air, birds called and twittered softly in the bushes by the lawn, and from somewhere very far away came the melodious sounds of chiming bells.

"He is breaking his heart for you, but he will never tell you," the words came back to her mind again, and with them the remembrance of Giles' face, quiet, cold, almost stern. Could it be true, what she had heard that afternoon? Could it be true that Giles was cold, not because he loved her too little, but because he loved her too much? That he would not tell her of his love, lest he should bind her unfairly to himself, when he fancied she ought only to be bound to someone of her own age?

"If you love him, tell him the truth . . . he will believe nobody but you . . . don't throw away your happiness and his . . . be true to yourself and to him . . . . and you will be true to your own womanhood."

Scattered fragments of all that Grace had said to her repeated themselves over and over again in her mind, but she tried to thrust them aside, when at last she went slowly down the great staircase into the hall, where Giles stood reading the evening paper. He had been too absorbed in what he read to hear her soft footfalls on the stairs, and it was only when she had nearly reached his side, that he lifted his eyes suddenly and saw her. And then—taken off his guard—something flashed into his eyes that Sylvia

had never seen there before, something which set her heart beating like a sledge hammer, and sent strange little thrills all along her pulses. The flash was gone almost as soon as it came; Giles was a past master in the art of self-control, and before a minute had ticked by on the grandfather clock in the corner, he had resumed his customary expression of quiet, fatherly interest. But Sylvia had seen that flash of something so different—so very different—in his eyes, and Grace's words came back to her mind with a new and overpowering force.

"He is breaking his heart for you . . . if you love him, tell him the truth. . . . he will never tell you."

Throughout the course of dinner, though she joined in the talk of her elders, Sylvia's heart was still thrilling with the remembrance of that flashing glance she had caught in Giles' eyes, and directly the meal was over, she stole out into the garden, to commune with herself in the starry stillness of the night. The roses were all in bloom; and tall white lilies gleamed whitely against the dark background of a holly hedge. The air was intoxicatingly sweet, the girl's senses stirred with a realisation of the glory of life: the light that never was on sea or land shone about her way, and she viewed the world with newly-awakened eyes. She felt like a person who walked in a heavenly dream from which she

half dreaded, half longed to awake; and when presently she stole back to the house, past the gleaming lilies and the fragrant roses, she moved softly like one afraid to break some wonderful spell. Her way led her by the library window, and there for a second her footsteps paused, whilst her eyes looked into the familiar room.

It was in semi-darkness, excepting for the circle of lamp-light surrounding Giles' table; and looking in from the velvety darkness of the July night, Sylvia could see Giles himself seated in his oak chair, his arms upon the table, his head buried in his hands. There was such an air of dejection about the whole man, that the heart of the girl ached intolerably, and when presently he lifted his head, and she saw the look of yearning on his face, she involuntarily put out her hands towards the window, and her lips parted as though to call his name. But no sound came from those parted lips, and even as she watched him silently, Giles dropped his head upon his arms again, with a gesture of such weariness, that the girl forgot everything else in the one overwhelming desire to comfort him at all costs. Every scrap of mother in her soul came to the surface at sight of the man she loved with that look of heart-break on his face, and without another moment of delay, she passed noiselessly through the window, and into the room. The man by the table did not hear her soft tread,

and all self-consciousness, all scruples, dropped from her as she reached his side.

"If you love him, tell him the truth . . . love is the greatest thing in the world."

The words echoed and re-echoed in her brain, and she put her hand gently on Giles' arm.

"Monsieur," she said, "I—want to tell you—something." At her touch he started violently, and looked up at her, the haggard misery of his face stabbing her afresh with pain.

"Sylvia!" he stammered, that was all, and his eyes looked hungrily up into her face, with a mute appeal in their depths which at last she understood.

"I—I've got to come and tell you—because you—won't—tell me," she faltered, her eyes falling before his.

"Won't tell you what?" he asked hoarsely.

"What—what—I've got to tell you," she answered, "only—it is so—hard to say it, and—I—am afraid."

"Afraid of me, little girl." A great tenderness rang in his voice, his hands all at once caught and held her hands. "You are not afraid of me. Can't you look on me as—your father, and tell me——"

"I can't look on you as my father," she answered mischievously, a whimsical smile flashing out over her face, "because—you see—I don't want you for

a father any more. I want—I mean—I've come to tell you—I—oh! Monsieur, I can't say it—it is too hard, but—can't you understand—oh! can't you understand."

With the childish impulse of her younger days, she flung her arms about his neck, and laid her soft face against his, and in a lightning flash Giles understood.

Gathering her closely into his arms, he held her to him as if he would never let her go, kissing her cheeks, her brow, her lips, with tender, lingering kisses.

"Did you mean to tell me you loved me like this?" he whispered.

"Like this," she answered softly, her lips touching his in their turn; "you wouldn't ever tell me—and I had to tell you—because love is the greatest thing in the world, and I could not let it go."

"We cannot either of us let it go, dear heart," he said. "We will keep it—always and always—my little girl—my queen—my wife!"

THE END.

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on 15 October, 2018